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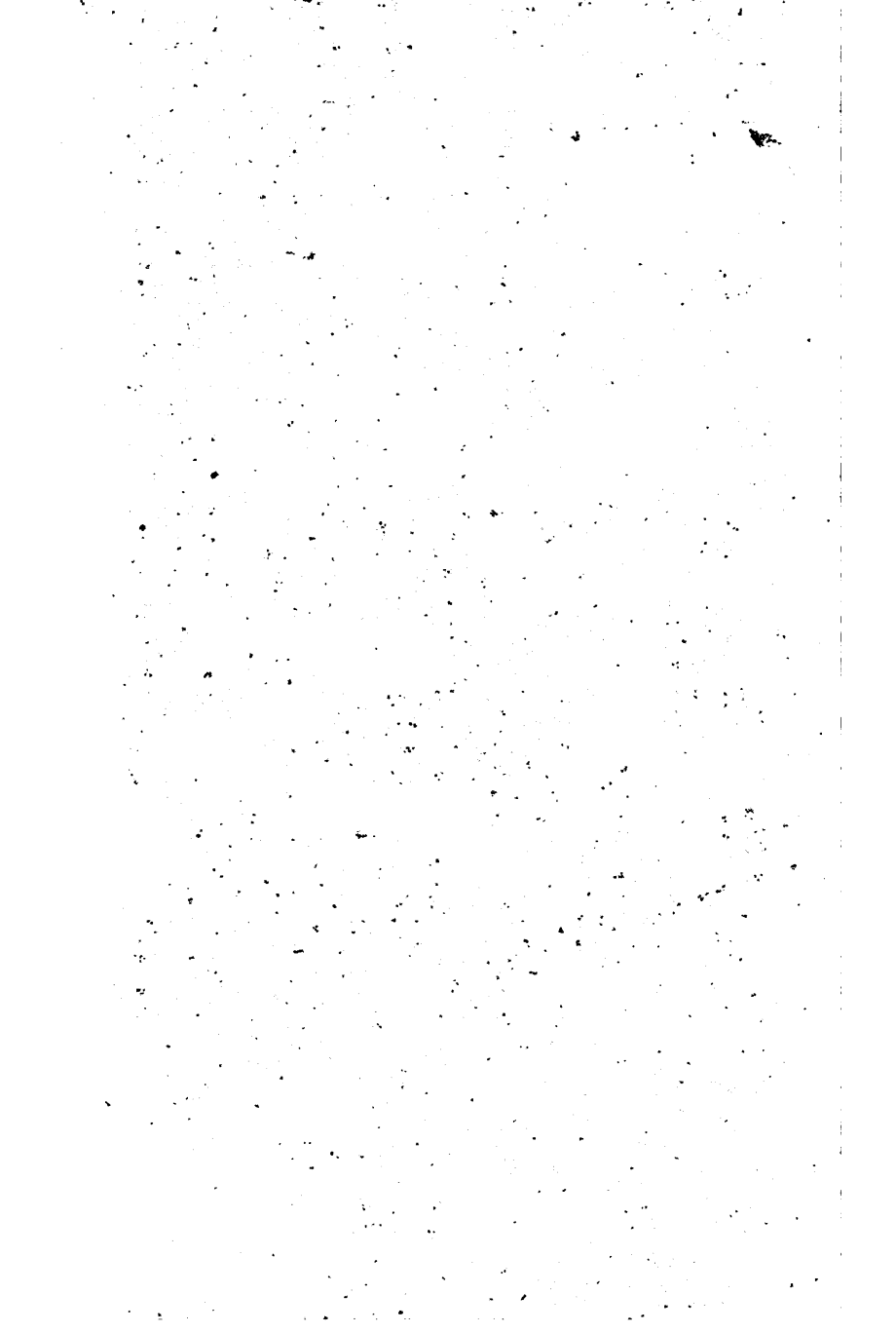
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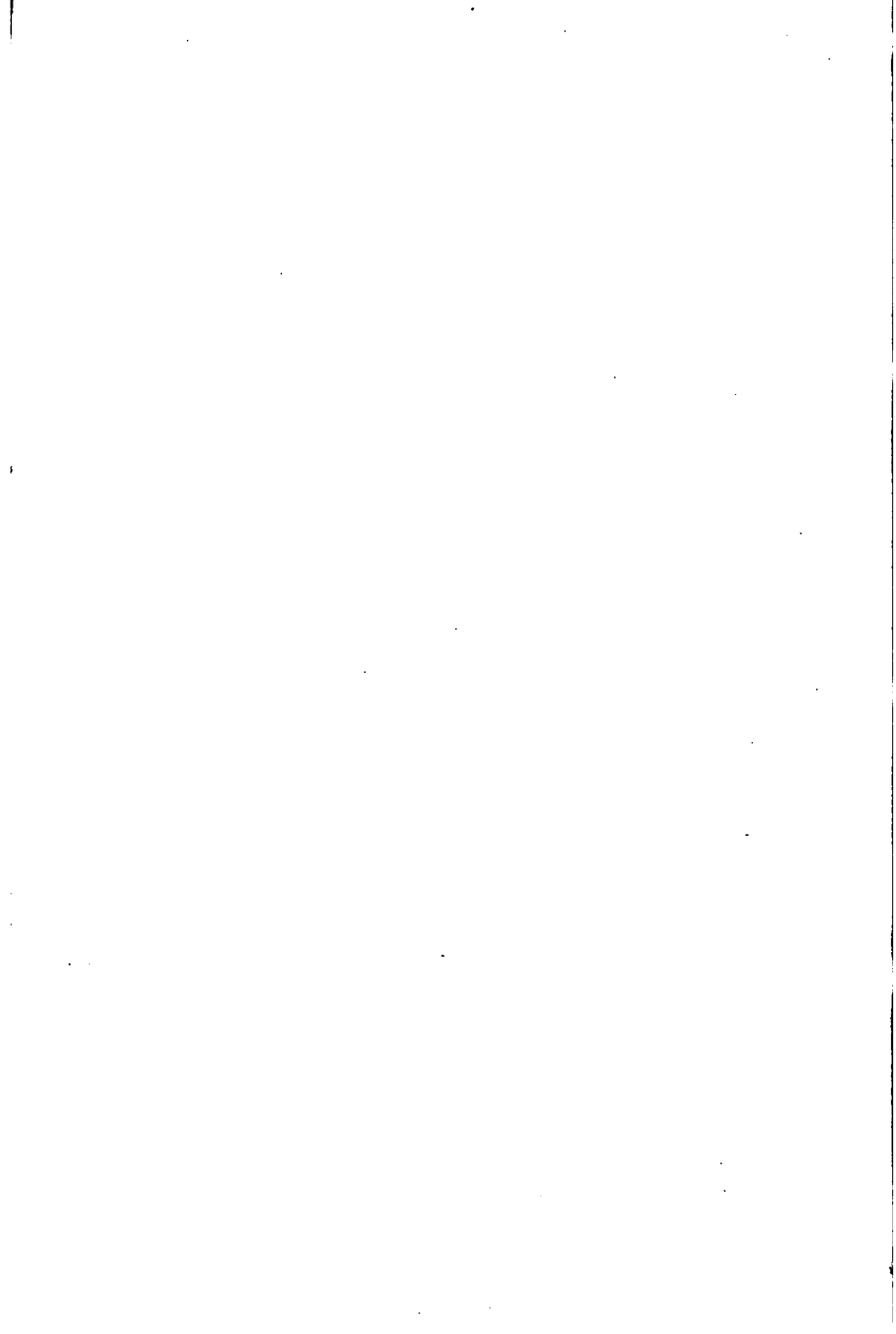
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YOUNG MISTLEY.



' We see the winner in the race ;
'Tis but of victors poets tell.
Who knows but, in a humbler place,
Runs one who has run just as well ?—
Debarred by some slight accident,
Withheld by freak of cruel fate,
Fighting against discouragement,
And grasping hope that comes too late.
Victory may be dearly won,
Brave he who gained the foremost place ;
Yet bravest may, when it is run,
Be he who ran the losing race.'

YOUNG MISTLEY.

IN TWO VOLUMES.
VOL. II.



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YOUNG MISTLEY.

CHAPTER I.

MONDAY evening had been fixed for the first rehearsal of the great dramatic entertainment ; and, as the time came near, Lena discovered that she was growing just a little nervous. Her part caused her few misgivings, for she knew it perfectly, having passed a most stringent examination at Charlie's hands ; to the acting of it she gave but little thought, leaving it, as actors should, to come of its own sweet will upon rehearsal. There were, however,

some trifling remarks on the well-worn pages of her play-book that gave the maiden great misgivings. These were printed in italics, and read as follows, or to like effect: 'Takes her hand ;' 'Places one arm round her ;' and so on, being instructions to a young man as to the manner in which he should make love. Assuredly an utter waste of printing-ink, especially when Lena Wright was to be the victim of such scandalous liberties.

Charles Mistley, as stage-manager, had naturally spoken much of the play, giving, in his good-natured lazy manner, tentative opinions, and asking advice from Lena and his brother upon sundry situations to be depicted. Of all had he fully treated, excepting this one most trying scene between herself and Winyard ; and this he appeared content to leave to their discretion. Once, indeed, he observed, with a little shrug of the shoulders, that the italics were often useless, and that different people had a perfect right to read

the parts in different ways. This vague remark Lena took as referring chiefly to those italics which somehow seemed to her to be most prominent in the whole book ; and she even gained some comfort therefrom, though Winyard, who heard the speech, only nodded his head, and let the subject drop. At times she regretted woefully that she had undertaken this most difficult *rôle* of a maiden who loved a villain, knowing him to be such, to the detriment of an upright man whom she could only respect. She almost wished that the whole affair had never been planned, and looked back in wonderment to the time when she herself had been the prime mover in it. What had come to her since then—what had made Charlie so different—what was this great change in everything and everybody ? Ah, Lena ! Ask what it is that makes a cloudy sea look bright and happy—what gives the sound of sweetest music to the mournful rustle of autumn leaves—what

makes sad people gay, and gay folks sad ?

Instinctively she knew, however, that the part was within the scope of her little-tried histrionic powers. She felt that she could endow it with life and semblance; and, above all, she understood the character of the girl she was intended to represent.

Such stage intercourse as she had with Charlie gave her no trouble. He was, indeed, supposed to be her lover, but of an old standing in love, and therefore less embarrassing ; while the difficulties that lay in Winyard's path, of a cross and undercurrent stream of passion, flowing into and discolouring with its villainy the purer and colder river of mild affection, required a tact and dramatic delicacy which Lena knew him to possess. Though, indeed, she knew nothing about it, only divining by aid of maidenly intuition, which turns from evil as surely as the compass-pole turns from the south.

But these were only Lena's thoughts, and sacred to her own heart. When she and the brothers talked of the coming representation, so keen was their delight in it, so sparkling the shafts of their wit, and so inconsequent their remarks, that the two mothers (who complained that the onus of the whole affair rested with them) gave it as their opinion that the piece would turn out to be an absurd farce, the true and skilful pathos of it being beyond the comprehension of such light-headed performers.

The first rehearsal bid fair to realize the misgivings of the elder ladies, so intensely ludicrous was it after the preliminary nervousness had quite worn off. This was the result of a deliberate plan on the part of the stage-manager, whose experience taught him that rehearsals beginning with laughter usually finished up with successful acting. Winyard and Lena were not in the first scene, and Charles Mistley's part was too unimportant

to have effect on it, the consequence being that it passed off very solemnly ; and Mrs. Wright, who was prompting, had but little work to do. The second scene began in the same manner.

‘Win—this will never do,’ whispered Charlie. ‘It is more like a School-Board examination than anything else. We must wake them up somehow.’

Winyard promptly obeyed his brother’s instructions, and on receiving his cue, introduced two new elements into the performance—merriment, and earnest acting, which can be combined with great facility. He set Walter Sandford at his ease by a passing joke, and a demand for his advice as to the placing of some furniture. Miss Mabel Sandford he pleased and amused by beginning to make love to her in mistake for Lena, calling forth from her ready tongue a maternal reproof. In short, this quick-witted youth carried out to perfection his manager’s wish in pulling

the company together, and setting everyone at ease.

Mrs. Wright, instead of prompting, helplessly wiped the tears of laughter from her eyes ; while Walter Sandford, the shy and awkward, rolled on a sofa in an ecstasy of amusement, which found vent in loud and unrestrained guffaws.

The end of the third act was approaching, and Lena felt with some misgivings that her difficulties were at hand, in the parting between her and the villain she was supposed to love, despite his villainy ; a way which women have.

She thought that Winyard must have forgotten the coming scene, so cheerful and thoughtless he appeared to be ; but in this she was mistaken. It is so easy to pass from one emotion to the other, the difference between a possible comedy and a possible drama is so infinitesimal, that we get sadly fogged in real life, hardly knowing whether

we should laugh or weep ; and so mixed up in this respect are our cheerful neighbours across the Channel that they have only one name for the two, calling everything a comedy, which perhaps is wisest after all.

In the midst of all the laughter, the idea suddenly came to Winyard that it would be a worthy triumph to quell the merriment, supplementing it with the opposite emotion, which is as near at hand.

In a whisper he said to Lena :

‘ Now we will show them what we can do !’ leaving her to understand it as she could.

But soon she did understand, and aided him beyond his expectations. The difficult scene appeared to pass away as if it were a portion of their real and earnest lives—for life is as real and earnest to the merriest of us as it is to those who pull long faces and suffer from dyspepsia. Lena forgot all about those embarrassing italics, though Winyard obeyed them, and more. By the sheer force

of his dramatic power he carried her away, and brought forward the talent of expressing pathos which he had detected when she had sung unwittingly to him. For the moment she was no longer happy Lena Wright (for assuredly nothing could whisper of sorrow in her young life), but the heart-broken girl, parting from her lover for ever ; and he, Winyard Mistley, acted the part as if he knew too well the pain and anguish he depicted so cleverly.

First the laughter died away, then vanished the last smile, as these two searched deeper and deeper into every human heart for the emotions which cannot fail to be hidden somewhere there. It was almost an inspiration, and quite a passing stroke of genius. No word of forethought had passed between them, and yet no mistake could be detected—the art, if art there were, was so well hidden, so craftily covered, that none could determine where it lay.

The spectators were hushed into silent wonder. With the majority of them, however, it was merely a piece of clever acting—an exhibition of dramatic talent such as lies in the power of most of us, though the demand for it may never come. But to two of them it was something more. The prompter drew in a long deep breath, and glanced nervously towards the stage-manager. Of course it was acting—mere acting—but Mrs. Wright did not like it. Such acting, such rehearsals were dangerous ; and why had that gray drawn look come over Charles Mistley's calm face ?

When it was over there was a momentary silence, as if each person present were waiting for some one else to speak. Winyard dusted some imaginary specks of carpet from his knees, as if family prayers had just been offered up, and proceeded to move the furniture, and re-arrange the improvised stage. This he did quietly and mechanically, which

served very well to ease the breaking of that silence, and to allow Lena time to come back to work-a-day speech and thought.

‘There,’ said Mrs. Wright at length, ‘you have made your prompter feel quite “choky,” which must be a triumph of acting.’

‘Well done!’ said the Colonel softly; and Charlie suddenly clapped his strong hands together, and spoke a little rapidly.

‘Splendid!’ he said—‘splendid! Everybody is all that a manager could desire. We will bring down the house with applause, I am certain. I am very much obliged to everyone for the intelligence and diligence with which they have studied their respective parts!’

They were all accustomed to Charlie’s peculiar grave jocularities, and laughed readily enough.

It was too late, Mrs. Mistley thought, to go through it again, and also she was sure

they must be tired. She glanced at Lena as she spoke ; but she, at all events, did not appear fatigued, for she was talking and laughing gaily with Charlie Mistley.

Soon afterwards the carriages began to arrive, and the visitors left in twos and threes.

When, at length, the two brothers were left alone to smoke a last pipe before going to bed, they sat for some time without speaking. They had never been much together, these two, and perhaps it was owing to this that they were somewhat different from other brothers in their mutual love. Mutual respect had an important place in the love they bore towards each other, and, as a rule, brotherly affection is without it. Charlie knew that his younger brother was cleverer, quicker, and in every way more brilliant than himself, and he was content that it should be so. Indeed, he was proud of it—proud to be the brother of Winyard

Mistley. And Winyard, the observant, was fully aware that this big grave brother of his was a better man than himself. He could not exactly define this feeling, he could not determine in what characteristic, in the possession of what virtues, or the freedom from what faults, this superiority lay ; but he felt its presence, and respect was mingled with his love. Perhaps the consequence was a diminution of that sense of easy familiarity which is considered nowadays a necessary adjunct to love. The Mistleys were not familiar. Without being formal, there was in their daily intercourse a peculiar half-expressed deference for the feelings of the other, which is more often found in the north of England than in the easy south. Their paths in life had divided very soon, and, as each had pressed on with firmer stride upon his chosen road, the space between had grown apace. Sons of a roaming race, contemporaries of an independent

generation, they were eminently capable of managing their own affairs, living down their own sorrows, and passing through their own joys, each in his individual way. The thought that they were drifting apart had never occurred to either of them, and Mrs. Mistley—a soldier's daughter, a soldier's wife—had early recognised how hopeless it was to attempt to draw together two men whose walks in life lay so far apart. One lost in the Punjaub, the other in the China Seas, how could they correspond, how could they hold together? And yet withal the love was there—that shy, awkward love of man for man which is the most beautiful conception of the human heart. Mrs. Mistley's life had been one wherein the shadow predominated over the sunshine; but one of the brightest periods of it was that short time at Broomhaugh—those few weeks wherein the brothers had come together again—and she found that her anxiety had

been but vain, that the wonderful tie of kinship had never snapped through all the strain of years.

On this particular evening, Winyard felt a strange increase of affection towards his brother. Never before had they possessed so many interests in common ; never had the thought come so prominently before his mind that too little had been said between them, too much left to the imagination.

Charlie sat by the open window of the little study in a low basket-work chair, and smoked with that good-natured placidity and sense of strong repose which suited so well his fair face and splendid stature. Winyard, seated near the screened fireplace, smoked more rapidly, as if to keep pace with his quicker thoughts, consuming more tobacco, enjoying it perhaps less. The calm peacefulness of his brother's demeanour quelled the words that were within his heart, bade him be as self-contained and

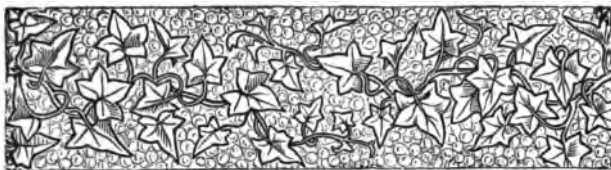
self-suppressing, drove back the restless eagerness of his soul, and spoke of a quiet attendance on the course of events which was beyond his comprehension, and had no place in his character.

If Winyard could only have seen beneath that calm and indifferent exterior, he might have found encouragement, he might have put into words the unusual thrill of brotherly love that warmed his heart. But Englishmen are not made so, and the moment passed, never to return ; the opportunity came no more, and Silence numbered another victim to her ruthless bow and spear. It is only on the stage that men have time and opportunity to make that little farewell speech which is to put a graceful finish to our comedy, clearing up the doubtful passages, explaining away misunderstandings, and mingling a prayer for charitable remembrance with the rumble of the curtain roller. It almost seemed as if Winyard Mistley

knew that this was a last chance of breaking down that invisible barrier which stood between his brother's heart and his own, a barrier which was nought else but shyness and a habit of reserve on either side.

It almost seemed as if his imagination could span the four hundred miles of silent night-ridden land that lay between him and two gray-haired, grave-faced men who were at that moment speaking of him within a little curtained room beneath Westminster's great tower. It seemed as if he could read the message addressed to him, and containing the mandate of an almost certain doom that lay beneath the anxious statesman's hand.





CHAPTER II.

THE following morning at the breakfast-table, a telegram was handed to Winyard, with the intimation that the messenger was awaiting the reply. The young man broke open the envelope, and read the flimsy pink paper. It took him scarcely a couple of seconds to glance over it, and he proceeded immediately to fill in the address on the reply-form enclosed. All at the table noticed that there was no hesitation, no indecision in his movements, and they remembered that incident later. Then he added the single word 'Yes,' and

handed the reply over his shoulder to the servant.

‘May I trouble you for the jam?’ he said, with an impudent smile towards Mrs. Wright; and it was only after he had helped himself largely to that condiment that he tossed the telegram to his brother at the head of the table. Life had, it seemed, for him no earnest side at all.

The bite of toast which Mrs. Mistley had just placed between her strong short teeth, tasted as no toast had ever tasted to her before. It was a peculiar mixture of absolutely no flavour and a nauseating bitterness. She *knew* that this telegram was important, and meant the end of these happy days; all her five senses were lost in one great throb of sad foreboding.

In the meantime, Charlie had read the telegram; and his face had remained inscrutable beneath the quick gaze of two pairs of undeceivable eyes. Lena was at his side,

and therefore could not see his face. She was smiling bravely at some cheerful remark of Winyard's. Strange to say, Charles Mistley did not raise his calm eyes to his brother's face after having read the message ; he looked past the pink paper, sideways, down at Lena's hand, which rested on the table close to him. The small white wrist was trembling as if from extreme cold ; and as the sailor saw this, a momentary contraction passed across his eyes.

The Colonel had laid down his knife and fork. One brown hand lay on the tablecloth in striking contrast to its whiteness, with fingers slightly apart as if in readiness to grasp something. His solemn eyes, beneath their heavy brows, were fixed upon his secretary's face with an old man's deep and silent expectation.

Only when the door had closed behind the servant who bore the unhesitating answer, did Winyard speak of the telegram.

‘You might let the Colonel see it—Charlie,’ he said coolly.

‘Business?’ inquired Mrs. Mistley with well-suppressed anxiety, as the folded telegram was passed from hand to hand.

‘Yes,’ answered her younger son, with his ever-ready smile; ‘my valuable services are once more required by a grateful country.’

‘What!’ exclaimed Mrs. Wright with sudden indignation, which might have been partly assumed. ‘After a fortnight’s holiday! I should refuse, if I were you!’ The good little lady was desperately anxious to keep the conversation going, for she had seen her husband change colour, and look up gravely at Winyard. She also knew that Lena had seen this too.

‘He that has put his hand to the plough should not look back, as Shakespeare or some one has observed,’ said Winyard readily.

‘I think,’ said Lena, with a clear, brave laugh, ‘that it is in the Bible.’

This was precisely what Winyard wanted, and he laughed promptly by way of encouraging the others.

‘May I have half a cup, mother—only half,’ he said presently, handing his cup, but without raising his eyes from the table.

‘Certainly! I beg your pardon!’ Mrs. Mistley proceeded to raise the lid of the coffee-pot, and look inside, as if she were about to make the strange mistake of adding water. She even extended her hand towards the hot-water jug, but somehow Winyard’s finger and thumb reached it first, and held it firmly to the table, though the part he held must have been unpleasantly warm. The unwonted resistance sufficed to recall Mrs. Mistley’s wandering thoughts, and she glanced quickly at her son to see if his action had been the result of intention and rapid observation, but he was looking the other way. It did not strike her at the moment that it would be difficult for any-

one to hold the bottom of a hot-water jug and be so supremely unconscious of it, but the incident was remembered afterwards.

‘I suppose,’ said Colonel Wright, handing back the telegram, ‘that you said yes.’

‘I did,’ replied the young fellow cheerfully.

‘And,’ observed his mother pleasantly, ‘are you going to tell us where you are going, what you are going to do, and when you are going to do it?’

‘Certainly,’ he replied, looking at his chief, whereat the old soldier smiled. The meaning of which was that the elder man’s simple diplomacy consisted chiefly of a discreet silence ; while, in contention, Winyard advocated a seemingly rash straightforwardness. ‘Certainly. I am despatched to Central Asia on a mission of some sort ; but having no details yet, I am specially warned against disclosing them.’

No one spoke, and no one made a pretence of continuing the morning meal for some

minutes. Outside, the rattle of a horse's hoofs on the hard road broke the silence of the quiet valley. Mrs. Mistley looked towards the window, and listened to the dying sound. Central Asia again! That dim, unknown land was destined to haunt her life. She knew only too well its dangers and manifold horrors. The sound of the horse's hoofs upon the road seemed to resolve itself into a weary repetition of the words 'Central Asia'—'Central Asia'—'Central Asia!' until it gradually died away in the low hum of the Broomwater. All at that table were more or less connected with the East—all felt the presence of that lowering cloud which grows and subsides again from time to time, like the clouds of heaven; and all knew that one day it will swell and gather darkness until the storm bursts at last. The meaning of that brave word 'Yes' was patent to them all.

But Mrs. Mistley was a brave woman;

also she was born (as could be seen from her soft inscrutable gray eyes) on the sunny side of the barren Cheviots, where folks do not hold much by an undue display of feeling. So she smiled upon her son, and asked : ' When ?'

' I must be in town,' he replied, studiously looking out of the window, ' on Friday afternoon.'

Lena it was who broke the silence that followed this announcement.

' Then,' she said very quietly, ' we must have the theatricals a day earlier.'

This remark, uttered in a most matter-of-fact voice, had the effect desired by its utterer. It relieved the tension, and gave Winyard something to chatter about. Charley also, in his slow way, took advantage of it to create a diversion with the toast-rack, which terminated in a resumption of breakfast. It was rather strange that, with two clever women of the world at the table, these young

people should thus have to take matters into their own hands.

‘I have a better idea than that,’ Winyard hastened to say. ‘We cannot well have the theatricals a day earlier now that everyone has been invited. Mother, tell me, is there not a train from Newcastle at five in the morning?’

‘Yes,’ replied Mrs. Mistley promptly. She was one of those rare women who can at a juncture give a decided opinion as to the time of day.

‘Well then, if the Colonel will be so good as to lend me his horse, we can manage it beautifully! We have not an animal in the stable that I can thoroughly trust—mine is too young.’

‘Do you mean to say,’ observed Lena, ‘that you would ride into Newcastle after the theatricals and the dance, at some unearthly hour in the morning—twenty-something miles?’

‘Certainly ; it would be rather a joke !’

‘Winyard’s idea of a joke,’ said the Colonel with some deliberation, while he kept his eyes fixed upon his plate, ‘has always been peculiar.’

The old soldier looked very grave, and made no attempt to keep up the conversation. This did not suit Winyard at all, who said cheerily :

‘Will you lend me your horse, Colonel ? I will be most careful with him, and will send him back by train from Newcastle.’

‘Oh yes ! You are welcome to the horse, my boy,’ said the old fellow ; and Lena noted the rarely-used expression of endearment.

‘You had better take my mare,’ she said airily. ‘She is faster than Socrates.’

Winyard was about to refuse, but, looking up, he met Lena’s eyes, and then for a moment he hesitated, finally saying :

‘Thank you !’

Thus the question was left open, but

gently biased on one side, like a woman's impartial judgment.

Breakfast over, Charlie accompanied the ladies out on to the terrace, while the Colonel followed Winyard to the little study. When the door was closed, the old soldier looked suddenly round at his companion with a characteristic brusqueness of manner.

‘Why have you undertaken this wild expedition to Bokhara?’ he asked.

‘Because,’ replied Winyard, with a certain playful pride, ‘I am about the only man who has a chance of getting there unknown.’

‘And do you believe that any good will come of it?’

‘No.’

It was in such incidents as this that the young fellow occasionally betrayed his military training, and the old soldier loved to see it. Blind obedience to orders, yielded by intelligent, *thinking* men, has been the making of England.

‘How will you go about it?’

‘Through Russia, I think. I want to have another look at Moscow, and would perhaps have a chance of picking up some maps there.’

‘But,’ said the Colonel, ‘you will never get into the country now. They know you too well.’

‘My idea was,’ said Winyard thoughtfully, ‘to get a new passport written out by that fellow they have at the Office, who writes such an atrocious fist that no one can read it. I would go from Hull to Cronstadt by sea. The officials there are so numerous and so self-satisfied, that in all probability I should get passed through under a name of their own construction; through no fault of mine, you understand, but owing to the badly-written passport, and my own unfortunate inability to speak any language but English. If that way fails, there are others equally simple. Then to Moscow by a slow

day-train ; there I would get other passports from some of our terribly mysterious Polish friends of the "English Club," go out of Moscow to the South a different person to him who entered from the North, leaving my passport in the hands of the authorities to file away among the State archives. By the time the police began to wonder why the passport was not called for, I should be beyond their reach. The plan is more underhand than I quite care about, but with such despotic people there is no avoiding a little trickery. It is simple, and likely to succeed on that account, I think.'

The Colonel was accustomed to Winyard's quickness of thought, and evinced no surprise at the rapidity with which this plan had been conceived, worked out, and laid before him 'cut-and-dried' within ten minutes of the event which had called for its birth. For half an hour the two men talked over the matter, calmly and in detail. Seeking

to be honourable and straightforward, as behoves Englishmen even when in intercourse with men who know not the meaning of such words, and determined to carry out the mission intrusted to one of them at all risks, and in face of every difficulty, as behoves brave men and patriots.

It was not without a sigh of envy (that sad and hopeless envy of old for young) that the Colonel listened to Mistley's plans and hopes ; but he felt all the while that even in his best days he would never have been equal to this daring young traveller in brilliancy of conception, rapidity of execution, and steadiness of purpose. There is no greater antidote for cankering envy than this same suspicion of inferiority. There was also in the old soldier's heart a pleasant glow of self-congratulation that the man chosen for this hard task should be his subordinate. A rough-riding young diplomate (a race quite distinct from the scented, wordy intriguers

of audience-chamber or conference-hall), whose *début* had been made under his own leadership, and whose knowledge came from his own teaching and experience.

Both men fully knew the dangers likely to be incurred, though neither spoke of them. Both had stepped over the threshold of that mysterious land of the far East, and for them the half-forgotten names of its cities had no halo of Arabian-Night-like glory. They took small account of these, except to denude them of the untold splendour and lavish wealth bestowed upon them by travellers' fables, and to reduce them ruthlessly to squalid townships. The hopeless, trackless wastes of desert sand and rounded stone were of much greater import to the solitary traveller. To him these spoke of months spent in weary travelling by burning sun and chilly night; they spoke of a maddening monotony—hunger, parching thirst, a gruesome solitude, and an unrecorded death.



CHAPTER III.

PRESENTLY Winyard left the Colonel. The old traveller was poring over a map, the greater part of which was occupied by notes of interrogation implying doubts on the part of the geographer. Of course it was by the merest chance that Winyard should pass out by the window instead of the door, and that he should cross the smooth lawn and go straight to the far corner of the old wall. It was that particular corner from whence the sea was at times visible far away to the east.

Adonis followed at his master's heels. Oc-

casionally he raised his rough muzzle, and sniffed at the air. There had been rain in the night, and from the valley there ascended a subtle odour of refreshed verdure. All around was fresh and cool and wholesome. Winyard Mistley crushed up the telegram within his jacket-pocket, so that the crinkle of the paper mingled with the whisper of the leaves above him. Then he looked round over the green hills, and softly whistled a popular air in the most matter-of-fact manner.

Doubtless it was owing to the merest coincidence that he found Lena at the corner of the wall when he approached. She was looking the other way ; indeed, she was leaning sideways over the wall to gather some sprays of woodbine which had climbed up within reach. The air was scented with a thousand autumnal odours ; but the breath of the woodbine penetrated, somehow, through all, just as love is popularly supposed to penetrate

through stone walls and the dead thickness of accumulated years.

Then these two foolish young people deliberately did the worst thing possible under the circumstances. They did nothing, and said nothing. He stood beside her, and looked away down the valley to the spot called Mistley's Gap, where the line of the meeting hills cuts the sky. She sat there, and waited for him to break the silence, expecting some laughing suggestion. But for the first time within the last few days Winyard was serious in her presence.

Lena, finding nowhere else to look, also gazed down the valley, where the shadows were blue and hazy, and the sheep as tiny insects upon the treeless turf.

Adonis now conceived the brilliant idea that something must be wrong, and promptly proceeded to put his paw into it, as might have been expected from a blundering old gentleman dog. He looked at Lena, long

and thoughtfully, with many a blink of his pink-rimmed eyes ; and then, without opening his teeth, he observed :

‘ Um—m—m ! ’ A plaintive protest, which seemed to say, ‘ If there is anything to be explained—explain now, and be done with it ! ’

Ah, happy Adonis ! In his canine philosophy such were wisdom indeed. He did not know that there are many things we would fain explain but dare not. Many a sentence left unfinished, to be filled up with little mental dots—thus, ‘ ’ as the hearer’s taste may dictate. But, after all, most of these are better left unsaid for ever. In one case out of the proverbial ten, speech might alleviate present sorrow ; in the other nine, it would but increase the pathos of life. If preaching were of any profit, what sermons might we, who have passed through the mill, reel off for the benefit of those who follow us ! It is so easy to say, ‘ Never keep a letter—

never preserve brown and withered floral products about which there hangs the vestige of a scent, strong enough yet to waken up a slumbering memory.'

Lena stooped forward, and, taking Adonis by the fore-paws, she hauled him bodily up on to the wall, during which process he did his best to look dignified.

It is strange how cruel men can be. Winyard looked down at Adonis as he stood on the wall with Lena's white arm round him; and, as if speaking to the dog, he said :

'You have never congratulated me.'

He did not raise his eyes from the contemplation of the faithful Adonis during the little pause before Lena spoke.

'I congratulate you,' she said indifferently.

Winyard smiled suddenly. The reply and manner of delivering it were so exactly as he would have done it himself, that it seemed as if she were mimicking him.

'I am sorry I have to go at such a short

notice,' he said conventionally ; but he laid his hand on Adonis's rough back close to her wrist, which somehow changed the burden of his remark.

' Yes, it is a pity,' she replied cheerfully, as if he were leaving to keep some pleasant engagement.

' However,' he said, stooping to examine the name inscribed on the dog's collar, which could not have been very new to him—' However, we will get the theatricals in.'

' Ye—es . . . we will get the theatricals in.'

He was not looking at the dog now, but at her.

' Did you really mean that offer of Fairy to ride into Newcastle to be taken seriously ?' he asked.

' Of course I did—quite seriously.'

' Then you think . . . I am to be trusted ?'

She hesitated for one brief moment, then raised her eyes to his bravely, and said :

' Yes—I think you are to be trusted.'

Winyard was slowly stroking the dog's shaggy back, and in the confusion of the fur his fingers touched Lena's hand which was resting on Adonis's shoulder; whereupon she moved higher up on to the woolly neck, thus leaving a larger piece of canine person free for caresses. But Winyard was clumsy—again his hand touched hers, so that Lena was at length obliged to withdraw altogether.

Woodbine is a wayward growth, hard to lead when growing, and loving little to amalgamate with other flowers when gathered. The few sprays that Lena had procured were peculiarly difficult to arrange with any degree of satisfaction, despite the efforts of ten nimble fingers; perhaps, however, these were not quite steady, especially when beneath Winyard's quiet gaze.

‘I am afraid,’ he observed meditatively, ‘that I will find no woodbine in Central Asia.’

‘Not being well versed in the vegetable

products of Central Asia, I reserve my opinion,' replied Lena demurely.

'I am afraid,' repeated the ingenuous youth with a sing-song intonation, 'that I will find . . . no . . . woodbine . . . in . . . Central Asia.'

His hand, resting on Adonis, was half open, as if expecting something. Then very slowly two sprays of woodbine were separated from their brethren, and extended, perhaps two inches, towards the expectant hand. With her head poised slightly to one side, Lena gravely admired them. Still the open hand did not move. One inch more, and Winyard's fingers moved to meet Lena's; still another inch, and the two sprays bid farewell for ever to their brethren in misfortune.

Lena rose from her humble seat upon the clean gray stone, and moved towards the house.

'I know,' she said, 'that Charlie is

patiently working away at the scenery. Let us be virtuous, and help him.'

And so she led the way into the house, Adonis and his master meekly following.

Since the midnight interview with Marie Bakovitch and her lover, Winyard had heard nothing from or of those unsatisfactory foreigners. He had duly advised Colonel Wright of the entire proceedings, and they had sought in vain some likely explanation of Ivan Meyer's peculiar conduct, for diplomatists grow sadly sceptical regarding the disinterestedness of human motives. Also is it difficult for the practical Western mind to comprehend the strange Quixotism of the Slav nature.

Winyard was somewhat uneasy about the whole affair. His own personal risk in the matter did not appear to him very great; but he was fully aware that he ran great risk of misapprehension, or, worse still, misrepresentation, if the circumstances of his

connection with Marie Bakovitch should transpire. A story such as that could so easily be twisted and turned into something quite different. He would have felt still more apprehensive had he known that his beautiful enemy had actually been a guest in Mrs. Wright's house under the name of the Baroness de Nantille, and that she was therefore personally known to his mother, Mrs. Wright, Lena, and his brother Charlie. But Winyard was spared these additional complications. Ivan Meyer had faithfully fulfilled his promise of leaving Walso with Marie as soon as possible, which, however, was not before the Wednesday morning, as the girl's condition was not such as would allow of a long journey. Had Meyer known that the slight amelioration in the state of her physical and mental health was only a temporary lull, he would have felt even greater relief than he did at turning his back upon the peaceful little town. The girl bore

the long journey well, but it was written that a higher Hand than Ivan Meyer's was now to guide her troubled steps. A blessed oblivion came over her tottering reason, and while the mind wandered, the body thrived and prospered.

It was only on the Thursday morning, in the midst of preparations for the theatricals and ball, that Winyard learnt of their departure from Walso. A groom had been sent into the little town to make some purchases, and when, on his return, he delivered his parcels to his young master, he mentioned that the 'furrineering folks' had left. It was a great relief. For although Winyard was not the man to bow down before an untoward wind—meeting, rather, every breeze of heaven as it came with watchful eyes and steady lips—his was a courage of that type which can afford to disguise no danger by detracting from it.

They were all working in different parts

of the old banqueting-hall, which had, for the time, been converted into a tiny theatre ; working, each in his characteristic way. Winyard with a dashing rapidity ; Charlie with easy-going indifference, accomplishing much without appearing to exert himself—directing everything without appearing to have a will of his own upon any one question. There was no fuss, no undue haste about his movements. As usual, he was ahead of his time, and could afford to waste a few moments here and there with some grave pleasantry. Colonel Wright was quite content to occupy a subordinate position. He was ready to lift the bigger flower-pots for Lena, hand the tacks to Charlie, or climb up a ladder with a hammer for Winyard. It was during the last-named service, when they were both perched high up on a ladder, that Winyard imparted to his chief the news he had just received.

‘I have just heard,’ he said in a low voice,

as he took the hammer, 'that our foreign friends have left Walso.'

Then, without waiting a reply, he turned and began driving a long nail into the hard beam. Most of us love to drive a nail, though few care for the more tedious task of first boring the hole. And so many deals are split in this world, and many hearts are broken.

Colonel Wright, from below, watched the steady swing of the hammer, and noted the almost boyish delight which Winyard took in his noisy occupation. It seems that with some people a proper sense of responsibility—a realization of life's gravity—never comes; and, what is stranger still, they appear to get on very well without it.

When the nail was driven, and the curtain duly arranged, the two men descended and stood back in the hall to enjoy the effect of their handiwork. They were out of earshot, and Charlie was hammering somewhere be-

hind the drop-scene on the stage, so Winyard took the opportunity of saying :

‘Colonel—it is just possible that something may come out in time about Marie Bakovitch—something untrue I mean, that might do her harm. If my name should in any way get on gossips’ tongues when I am away, do not trouble to contradict anything to the general world. For her the contradiction would be worse than the slander, for it would mean a charge of attempted murder. For myself I thought I did not care but now I find I do. I should not like your Mrs. Wright and your daughter to believe anything they might hear. You understand?’

‘Yes,’ replied the Colonel slowly. ‘I understand. Shall we put up the other curtain now?’



CHAPTER IV.

THE critical moment had come. The stage was ready, the footlights burning cheerily, and Colonel Wright was at his post with the curtain-cords held tightly. Through the curtain came the buzz of many voices, slightly hushed by expectation.

Charles Mistley, cool and good-natured, was clearing the members of his unruly little company off the stage. After a last glance round he made a sign to Colonel Wright, and the curtain ran smoothly up. The first two acts went off merrily enough. The audience was charitably inclined, and their

charity was not called for, which phenomenon invariably has a most pleasing effect. The young manager was more and more surprised at the excellence of his little company, especially as regarded the judgment they displayed in gradually toning down the merriment as the play progressed, and the last pathetic scene approached.

It was a cunning play, written by a master-hand, and cunningly acted. Moreover, it had been well rehearsed. Charles Mistley rose to the occasion quietly and steadily, as was his wont. He appeared to know everyone's part as well as his own ; but only displayed this knowledge when absolutely necessary, for he possessed a virtue without which no man is a leader—absolute faith in those beneath him.

The curtain descended at the end of the second act amidst great applause ; but when this had died away, a sudden silence supervened. There was a vague feeling among

the auditors that a crisis was coming—that they had been made to laugh, simply in order that they might the more easily be made to weep. Sad and softly sighing music—which works on the human feelings like water on a penny bun, softening and enlarging—now followed.

Charles Mistley had decreed that the longest interval should be between the third and fourth acts, on the consideration that suspense sharpens the mental appetite. Few alterations were required on the stage, and Winyard was setting straight things that were already straight, a way we sometimes have when expectation is pressing on us, when Mabel Sandford hurried out of the ladies' dressing-room.

‘Winyard,’ she said in a whisper, ‘I am awfully afraid Miss Wright is going to break down. When I went into our dressing-room just now, she was as white as a sheet. She said there was nothing the matter, and

went out into the conservatory, I believe ; but I saw her lips trembling, and she walked unsteadily. I don't want to alarm you unnecessarily, because I am sure you must be getting tired yourself, but a glass of wine or something would probably put her right.'

Winyard never liked Mabel Sandford as he did at that moment. For the first time in his presence she had forgotten herself, and in consequence appeared, as she in reality was, a very good-natured girl.

'Thanks, Mabel,' he said simply. 'I only hope it is not nervousness. I will take her some wine, and will also send some into the ladies' dressing-room. I ought to have thought of that before. Mind take some yourself, because your work is not over yet, and remember you will have to dance till daylight after this !'

'Oh, I am all right, thanks !' laughed the girl, turning away. 'I have plenty of time to change my dress, have I not ?'

‘ Yes, plenty !’

For some moments Winyard Mistley stood motionless, alone, upon the little stage. Then he stooped down, and with peculiar care smoothed a wrinkle out of the carpet. Who can tell what were that young fellow’s thoughts ? Perhaps he could not have analyzed them himself. This evening, a merry little company—laughter, chaff, and gaiety. To-morrow, a breaking up ; a dismantling of all this hollow scenery ; a gray dusty hall with here and there a flower, brown and withered, thrown into a corner ; a dull atmosphere, heavy with the scent of perfume and paraffine cynically mingled. Perhaps he realized then that a woman’s lot—that aching sorrow of one left behind—is infinitely harder than men quite recognise.

Slowly he walked across the stage, and passed out into the garden. In the dimly lighted conservatory he found Lena sitting alone. She was leaning forward with her

bare hands clasped upon her knee. In crossing the garden, the little curls above her temples had been blown aside, and now the pale light of the lamp suspended among the ferns above her, fell lovingly on the brown hair, and drew forth little golden gleams. She heard the footstep in the darkened doorway, but did not look up or move.

Winyard stood for a moment in the doorway. The light fell on her face in such a way that he could see the gleam of tears in her eyes. There was a little movement in his throat and in the muscles of his firm chin, as if he were swallowing something with an effort, and then he advanced towards her with the usual misleading smile. It would appear that he attributed those tears to over-excitement in connection with the last act of the play. Indeed, there was nothing else for him to do, no other cause for him to seek, under the circumstances. No doubt he felt that the evening was far

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from its close as yet, and preferred to ignore the farewells with which it was to terminate. Men cannot do things well without giving their whole mind to the work they have in hand at the moment, and Winyard was, without doubt, thinking only of the theatricals.

‘Tired ?’ he said interrogatively.

Lena nodded in acquiescence, and slightly turned her head so that her face was in the shade.

‘Miss Wright,’ he said with mock severity, for he was desperately afraid of appearing serious, ‘this will never do !’

She did not reply, and made no attempt to acknowledge the brilliant sally.

‘Lena,’ he said suddenly, using her Christian name, which he did but rarely ; ‘Lena, this is not like you !’

She was dressed for the third act—in white, as he had desired it, of a soft silky material that clung round her sweet young

form in cunning folds. There was in her whole being a subtle sense of refinement. Her dress was perfect ; what little jewellery she wore was faultless ; even the manner in which her hair was arranged spoke of the deft handiwork of practised fingers. As he stood at her side, the scent of the white jasmine at her throat reached him, and brought back the memory of his request. In an instant he saw that all was exactly as he had desired it. Was it blindly, or with wondrous foresight that he persisted still in his jocularities ?

‘ I am a little limp myself,’ he said cheerfully.

Then Lena recovered herself, and mentally stood at bay, as every true woman would have done in her place.

‘ It is very tiring—is it not ?’ she said indifferently.

There was one weak spot in the armour of her pride. Her voice was calm and per-

fectly steady, but its tones were singularly at variance with the unshed tears that trembled on her lashes. She had trusted to the advent of an opportunity to conceal these before he could see them, not knowing that it was too late.

It is strange how little incidents remain fixed upon the human memory, like the few tiny leaves still green upon a stricken tree when the others have fallen from it. This small inconsistency of tearful eyes and a cheerful voice never quite left Winyard's memory. Gradually he came to look upon it as peculiar and individual to Lena ; typical of her sweet, gentle courage.

And so they acted their little parts alone in the dim light of a single lamp, without the aid of stage-effect or music. An unrehearsed effect, an unpremeditated scene ; vain, empty words spoken with averted eyes.

‘ I cannot quite understand you,’ said the girl in the same conventional tone of forced

interest. 'I am very much afraid you must be heartless, and devoid of filial feelings.'

'Inasmuch as how?' he asked, slowly pulling an innocent fern into small pieces.

'Because you completely ignore the fact that you practically start to-night, after all this is over, upon a journey which in all probability will be . . .'

'My last!' he suggested frivolously, as he threw all the particles of fern into the air, and watched them flutter to the ground as if it were a most interesting experiment.

She was silent, and appeared to be entirely absorbed in removing from her dress a small end of thread left there by a careless seamstress.

'At all events, there are risks attached to it.'

'I think,' he said, 'that you are overrating things a little.'

That wretched little white thread would

keep swimming about in the most unaccountable manner. Lena longed to give even the most hurried touch to her eyes; and even as she longed, Winyard turned his back to her, and went beneath the lamp to consult his watch. Though he contemplated the bland face of that reliable piece of mechanism for some moments, he never saw the time; but that did not matter very much.

‘It would be rather hard to overrate Bokhara,’ she said quietly.

Then he turned and slowly came back to her side. There was an uncomfortable, drawn look about his lips, and his eyes were dull as he watched her mechanically smoothing the folds of her dress.

‘How do you know that it is Bokhara?’ he asked in a low, steady voice.

‘I made . . . papa . . . tell me.’

‘I am sorry you did that . . . extremely sorry. Tell me . . . does my mother know?’

‘No! No one beyond myself. But you

must tell her. It is better that she should know—even that it is Bokhara—than be kept in ignorance and suspense. I think . . . that you do not quite understand . . . women !’

‘I thought there was something on the old gentleman’s mind,’ said Winyard, suddenly changing his manner. ‘Nevertheless, I still maintain that you are looking at the worst side of things. There may be one or two risks, but . . . I am a very lucky fellow, you know, and generally turn up smiling at the end of a difficulty.’

‘I think,’ said Lena, remorselessly refusing to smile, ‘that your talents are a decided loss to the British stage !’

He looked fixedly at her, as if attempting to penetrate the obscurity ; but she kept her face averted, and he could read nothing from the dainty coils of hair turned towards him. Then the tone of his voice changed again ; he dropped his usual semi-bantering style,

and spoke as she had never heard him speak, except on the occasion of the first rehearsal, in a voice which conveyed a happy mixture of pathos and philosophical indifference.

‘I have a difficult part to play,’ he said, ‘and you are making it doubly so.’

She did not understand him. Her only feeling was one of anger at her own slowness of comprehension ; she felt that there was a deeper meaning in the words than she had caught, and the moments were slipping—slipping by.

‘Come !’ he said briskly, offering her his arm ; ‘we will go and get some wine, or *you*, for one, will never get through the next act. Charlie has been dosing the whole company, I believe ; it is a way far-seeing stage-managers have.’

It was something new for Lena to be spoken to like this—she who never confessed to fatigue, who could dance till sunrise ; but she meekly obeyed him.

They got through the third act successfully, and the curtain descended in silence. This only lasted, however, a moment, and was quickly followed by deafening applause. It had been almost too real. The music, the lowered lights, and perhaps the dull excitement of the approaching farewell, had affected the actors, and into their parts they threw an intensity and earnestness which in the business-like rehearsals had been beyond their powers.

It was one o'clock before the last of the guests at length drove away, and Winyard ran upstairs to change his clothes for the long journey before him.





CHAPTER V.

WHEN the traveller came downstairs again, he found the whole party assembled in the drawing-room.

His rough tweed suit formed a strange, uncomfortable contrast with the evening dresses around him. Despite his fatiguing evening, he appeared quite fresh and energetic.

Charles Mistley was the only other person present who did not look worn and tired ; nothing seemed to affect him.

‘ Half an hour before I need leave,’ said Winyard cheerily ; ‘ I mildly propose that you all go to bed.’

‘I propose,’ amended his mother, ‘that everyone goes to bed except me. If my son does these wild things, I should be the only sufferer thereby.’

‘And I propose,’ said the Colonel, with his grim smile, ‘that we all go and have some more supper.’

‘I could not eat a thing,’ remarked Mrs. Wright decisively.

‘Nor I!’ ‘Nor I!’ came from other parts of the room.

‘Mother has had no supper, I know,’ said Winyard; ‘and the Colonel was carving, so *he* got nothing to speak of. I propose that we bring something in here. Come along, Charlie.’

The brothers presently returned loaded with plates and other necessities.

‘I think,’ suggested Winyard, looking sideways at Lena, ‘that it would be most appropriate to finish up the whole entertainment with a song.’

The girl silently went to the piano, and after a short search found a small manuscript-book. Winyard came up at that moment, and taking it from her hands, opened it at the unpublished song which she was singing when he first saw her. It was on the first page of the book, written out in a girlish hand, the notes large and very inky.

Lena began the harp-like accompaniment, and sang. Slightly behind her, on a low chair, her father sat and eat cold chicken with an old man's deliberate enjoyment. Winyard, in his light-coloured suit, was perched on the high end of the sofa with his thick boots dangling. Charlie stood near at hand, pouring champagne noiselessly into a glass.

The girl appeared to sing the first verse with a studied disregard for the meaning of the words, doing her best to render them expressionless. The second, however, she rendered with more of the true intensity ;

but at the end of it she stopped abruptly, and closed the book.

‘It is rather *too* appropriate,’ she said, wheeling round, and pointedly addressing Mrs. Mistley.

Then she rose from the piano, and crossing the room, dropped wearily into a low chair.

‘I wish you would go to bed, Lena,’ said her mother; ‘you are thoroughly tired out.’

‘I! Oh no! I am not a bit tired. If I look pale, it is the result of paint and powder. Professional people are always pale when the paint is washed off, are they not, Charlie?’

‘Oh yes!’ replied the sailor gravely. ‘Look at me, for example!’

Everyone did so, and laughed at the sight of his brown and weather-beaten face, which was exactly what he wanted. Perhaps he had more faith in his own powers of bearing a general scrutiny just then than in Lena’s.

They talked on in a vague, uninterested way, as people do at a wedding or a funeral, while waiting for a curtain to rise, or to kill time while a ship is sinking beneath their feet. We are getting very clever nowadays. Soon the flora and fauna of the world will be exhausted—soon we will know everything worth knowing about every animal on earth ; but of certain phases of the human mind we know no more now than Noah knew of the inward thoughts of Shem, Ham, and Japheth.

At last the gravel, outside, grated under the light feet of Lena's mare, and the heavier tread of a sleepy groom.

Adonis, who had been tranquilly sleeping in the hall, now sidled his way through the slightly open door. He looked towards the window, listening intently the while ; then, remembering that life is not all repose and furry mats, he looked briskly at Winyard with uplifted ear.

'Is this anything to do with us, my

master ?' he asked with his honest, sorrowful eyes.

It happened that there was silence in the room just then. Mrs. Mistley was breathing a little quickly ; she glanced almost furtively at her younger son's face. Everyone else was looking vaguely at Adonis, except Charles Mistley, and he was watching Lena quietly and indifferently.

'Yes, Adonis,' said Winyard, breaking the silence, 'you and I must go. There is no continued rest for sinful dogs !'

It had been arranged that Adonis should henceforth live in Seymour Street, as Mrs. Mistley was going to Paris, and Broomhaugh would be empty.

The stupid dog then deliberately turned to Lena, and gave a little jerk of his stumpy tail, accompanied by a bland smile which seemed to say :

'Of course you are included in this arrangement.'

‘Come here, you dear old thing,’ said Lena in reply, ‘and I will carry you to the door.’

Adonis, who was a philosopher, concluded that it was no business of his to heed a few crushed laces. If people liked to embrace him and carry him about, throwing cool arms around him and pressing his rough side against silks and soft muslins, assuredly that was their affair. Only he tried truly to behave like a gentleman, and to look as if he liked it. With due preservation of a courtly smile, he wondered in his inmost dog what that was a-pitter-pattering so hurriedly against his muscular ribs.

On the doorstep his surprise was somewhat increased (though in nowise betrayed), when a pair of fresh young lips lightly touched his shaggy forehead. However, he gravely cocked his ear for the whisper that followed :

‘Adonis, darling, I think my heart is breaking !’

He heard, and wagged his tail.

In the meantime Winyard had donned his gloves. He slipped two fingers beneath the girths, and gave a preliminary tug at the stirrup-leathers ; then he turned to say good-bye.

‘I expect,’ he said, ‘to see you all in town in a week or so. We will not call this good-bye, because I have not got all my pretty farewell speeches quite ready. They require further rehearsals. Do not stand at the door,’ he added, with his imperturbable cheerfulness. ‘You will catch horrible colds, and abuse me behind my back !’

Then he mounted. The last person with whom he shook hands was his brother Charlie, who had been standing at the horse’s head. It was strange how the young sailor invariably found something to do, and was never to be discovered idle.

‘Come, Adonis!’ Winyard called out, and then he vanished in the darkness.

Despite his injunctions they stood at the door. Through the still night air the sound of Fairy’s doings came distinctly to their ears. At first the springy walk that betokens a desire for more exhilarating work, then a flighty unsteady trot, soon followed by an even thud of armed hoofs with a ringing promise of many miles before a lag or halt.

Once they heard him say, ‘Come along, old man!’ to Adonis, and then the steady ‘clapperat—clapperat—clapperat’ rose and fell again. That was all the watchers heard—that and the low murmuring voice of the Broomwater.

Slowly, slowly, like the memory of our dead, the sound diminished as Fairy sped along, till finally it was lost in the brawl of the stream away down in the dark valley beneath.

Then Mrs. Mistley, Mrs. Wright, and the Colonel turned and entered the house. Lena and Charlie were left alone. They stood side by side, and listened for a sound that was dead. So still were they that Charlie could hear the hurried tick of his own watch. Lena stood motionless, and showed no sign of moving. Her companion waited for some minutes with the peaceful patience of a sailor, and then he said in little more than a whisper :

‘Come, Lena !’

She turned and looked at him vaguely, as if she had not been aware of his presence. He was standing in front of the open door ; a beam of light flooding out into the darkness rested on his upright form, and gleamed on the dead white of his linen. He was motionless and quiet as usual—the personification of equability and strength. From his unusual height he looked down at her gravely.

‘Come,’ he repeated. ‘We have had a hard day—let us go in. Beware of that little step.’

And, under pretext of guiding her, he took her hand within his arm, and entered the house.

They found the old people in the drawing-room. Something detained Lena in the hall, so Charlie passed into the room first. He had a peculiar way of ignoring what people are pleased to call the necessity of speech, and now he leisurely crossed the room without a word. Upon the mantelpiece a candle was flaring up and smoking, something having become attached to the wick. To this Charlie directed his footsteps, and began quietly to extinguish one candle after another. Mrs. Wright noted the action, and wondered whether he was diminishing the light of the room with a purpose, or whether his occupation was aimless.

When Lena entered the room, she found

that everyone except Charlie was looking towards her.

‘Well?’ she said smiling, as she crossed the room.

‘Well!’ replied Charlie at once, without turning round.

‘I think,’ said Lena, without addressing anyone in particular, ‘that it was a great success, don’t you? Everybody *said* they enjoyed themselves immensely, and I really believe they meant it.’

‘I am sure they did,’ affirmed her mother readily, with a little contraction of the eyes. ‘The floor was lovely, I know, because I tried it. Charlie led me astray as usual, and made me dance, against my principles and despite my gray hairs.’

‘I heard,’ said Lena mischievously, ‘several people talking about an elderly lady from London being the best dancer in the room. But . . . there is papa pulling his moustache to keep himself awake. You old people

keep such shockingly late hours. Puff . . . there goes a candle—puff . . . there is another. Good-night, Mrs. Mistley—good-night, mother—good-night, poor sleepy old gentleman . . . Good-night . . . Charlie.’





CHAPTER VI.

NO man can speed through the night air without experiencing a more or less clearly defined sense of exhilaration. One is almost raised above mere human feelings, which, as we all know, are fleeting as the sunset redness. It makes one envy those grand old forefathers who careered along the broad high-roads through night and day. It is not merely the speed itself and the mighty rush of severed air round bravely prominent ears, for one can get those by embarking on one of the fast trains that rush away nightly from London, like a family of spiders racing

from the centre of their web outwards to where the tissue is of firmer make, and life less great with pressure. No ! there is something more—something gathered from the merry stars or the pale sad moon—something inhaled with the cool night-odours of the earth. To enjoy it all it is perhaps necessary to have the gentle companionship of a horse, himself slightly nervous by reason of the huge shadows and ghostlike heaps of broken stone—to feel him testing, as it were, your reliability in case of emergency by gentle mouthing of the bit.

It could not be stated, with that rigid regard to the truth which the present writer has invariably endeavoured to observe, that Winyard Mistley went on his way rejoicing ; but he was not insensible to the glorious scene around. A half-moon was setting over the western heights, her light as yet too feeble to impair the modest beauty of her attendant stars. The great sombre hills lay

silent and deserted beneath the brilliant canopy of night, cutting the dark heavens with their darker outline.

The sweet subtle odour of the slowly waving pines mixed with the cool air, and refreshed all drooping nature with its tonic strength. Winyard inhaled deep draughts of it, and rejoiced. The wonderful freshness of our northern nights is a gift fully appreciated by those who have lived beneath a warmer zone.

Fairy peeped back with white-gleaming eyes, and gently [tongued the bit in vain endeavour to find out who this might be upon her back. The hand upon the bridle was as light as Lena's; but the weight upon the saddle a very different matter. Also, she felt a greater watchfulness upon the movements of her dainty head, as of one who knew her not, and yet was inclined to kindly thoughtfulness. There was no longer the ripple of the habit tickling, yet comfort-

ing, her shining flank ; but still it could not be the groom (though the odour of tobacco-smoke was in the air), for the legs were longer and less cruel in their grip.

The home-like creak of warming leather had a certain sense of companionship, however ; and as this grew regular with her more even trot, Fairy began to settle down to her work with a pleasant respect for him who was her guide and trusty guardian through these shadowy horrors of the night.

Then her ears, becoming motionless, at length discovered the measured tread of four unshod feet upon the road beside her. Devoting one ear to the investigation of this, while the other was deputed to look out for other surprising matters in front, she soon arrived at the conclusion that the flying feet were the property of that pleasant but rather distant dog of unprepossessing and dishevelled appearance who had lately arisen upon the scene.

Adonis felt instinctively that this was no pleasure-trip, but serious work at last. This was no time for stopping to inhale at closer quarters those delightful ratty odours that every now and then assailed his sportive nostrils—no time to pounce through nettle and low tangle upon some affrighted little scuttler who had not the common-sense to lie quiet till all danger was past and over. So he set his ears well back, avoiding, like a clever mariner, all inequalities such as catch against the wind; and, allowing to hang from the leeward side of his mouth his red and dewy tongue, he sped along. He turned his eyes neither to the right nor left, but fixed them on his master's foot passed through the stirrup-iron above his shaggy head.

Winyard carried no whip—perhaps from some Quixotic dislike for dealing such admonishment to the willing little steed that knew Lena's touch and voice so well. And in justice to Fairy it must be recorded that

she took no undue advantage. At the summit of the steep old-fashioned bridge spanning the Broomwater, she stopped by command, and drew into her wide-spread nostrils the fresh water-tainted air, while Winyard, peering under the swaying branches, took a last long look at the brawling trout-stream, and wondered if ever he should look on it again—if ever the same trio, Adonis, Fairy, and he, should stand again together and listen to the sweet laughing water, those thousand musical ripples dear to the heart of a fisherman through all his life.

Then Fairy bravely faced the steady ascent of the narrow road, zigzag up the bare hillside. Already the yellowing moon was kissing the lofty horizon ; already the eastern sky was changing colour.

The black intensity soon lost its sense of utter opaqueness ; gradually a light green shade rose, in fan-like rays, up from the distant ocean. As the traveller reached the

summit of the pass this slowly acquired a pink hue of coming richness, creeping softly up like the blush of pleasure mounting to a maiden's brow.

Now the rich lowlands, awakening, drew over themselves a veil of pearly gauze, leaving the black tree-tops standing out in shamefaced bulk amidst a sea of cloud.

Fresh morn was hard at work, sweeping away all shades and mysteries of night; even as the light of the great Dawn will rest upon the shadows of unanswered questions, and show up in a blaze of glory the mighty scheme of which we form a detail, sweeping off all web and tanglement where dust lies thick and choking.

And now a clear straight line appeared low down in the eastern sky, dividing the growing light into two separate shades of pearly-green.

Winyard Mistley looked on this, and knew it was the sea. Distant objects on the vast

plain beneath him now began to loom up from unexpected quarters, like skirmishers when the bugles call. Beneath this great unlovely level Nature had, with characteristic waywardness, hidden broad seams and strata of her richest treasures.

Above the damp mist towered here and there, among the sparsely-growing trees, strange, gaunt erections, black chimneys, and huge whirling wheels held high aloft.

As the light increased, a breeze from the cold North Sea came bowling over the level, rolling away before it like a huge soft blanket the morning veil, and laying bare the thinly-populated land.

Then, from the height, Mistley saw the distant seaport villages, and followed with wondering eyes the intersecting railway-lines, each running from its coal-pit to sea-board, or to join the broader iron-way running north and south. Around each pit was

grouped its little coaly village, tiny cottages and hovels clustering near the great smouldering heap and spider-like erections, like starlings round a raven.

On its surface the land was meagrely tilled, for all the cultivation lay below. Away beneath those deserted squares of salty pasture were passages and crossways, lines of rails and darksome caverns, intersecting, crossing, recrossing, climbing and descending.

Creeping, crawling, and grovelling, black-faced, hardy men were for ever under there; following with tiny tunnel the bent of every seam. When the coal-dust is washed off these grimy toilers are strangely pale, for there is assuredly more night in their lives than in most human pilgrimages.

By the time that Mistley had reached the plain, the glow of coming sunrise was over the sea. All nature was awakening to the fact that another day was at hand. In

the trees and low hedges the birds were twittering tentatively and low, like an orchestra tuning up. Doubtless they were clearing their little pipes (for the east wind from the North Sea makes all throats gruff) in order that their Maker should be praised with clear and ringing notes.

Presently the sun raised one merry beaming eye over the line of the horizon, calling all the world to laugh and rejoice in that he had come again. Across the placid sea shot he one golden shaft of light which lay lovingly on the broad yellow sands, where the hardy Vikings had of old hauled up their marauding war-ships.

And now the young traveller spoke cheerily to Fairy, and bade her be glad that her work was more than half accomplished.

Already the trees looked happier by reason of a more lusty growth generated by kindly companionship.

Gosforth was awake as Fairy threw up the black dust of the road. Every cottage chimney was smoking with a promise of housewifely preparations for the weary night-shift men, even now coming up from the bowels of the earth with dazzled eyes, and a wondrous great appetite for breakfast.

To the southward the whole atmosphere was darkened with the heavy poison of strange-smelling smokes, rising sullenly from the banks of the busy Tyne. Tall chimneys broke the line of distant hill, and below, in a dull blue haze, lay the much-tried city of Newcastle.

Within this impure haze of smoke and night-damp was a whole army of chimneys, tall and short, dimly discernible like soldiers on a battle-field when the smoke lies low.

Respectable Jesmond was asleep when Fairy clattered through; Northumberland

Street, now gradually launching into retail commerce, likewise. In Grey Street, a solitary policeman gazed sleepily at the solitary horseman, and thought of some poor doctor who was doubtless about to be called from his warm bed.

Then horse and rider parted company with mutual esteem warming either heart; for Fairy loved a gentle hand and a kindly voice, and was justly proud of the white lather near her girths.

Twenty minutes did Mistley devote to her welfare—for the ostler was sleepy, and rubbed with little vigour—and ten to his own, beginning a new day, as he had begun many, with no other mark between it and the previous day's work than a good splash in icy water.

The train was poorly filled, folks over the border being marvellously careful of their own comfort, and there was little difficulty in securing an empty carriage.

Adonis gravely seated himself opposite his master, and waited like a well-behaved dog till he was spoken to.

This happened very soon after the rumble of the huge High-Level Bridge was left behind.

‘Adonis!’ said Winyard, with great gravity, ‘has it ever occurred to you to find out that you were not so clever as you thought yourself? I have just made that discovery, old fellow, and it is not pleasant. I thought that I had my feelings and inclinations under perfect control. I imagined that the world was an oyster, which would spring open at the first touch of my sword. But I was a fool, Adonis—a blind fool. Yes; that is right—grin and wag your tail; pretend you know all about it, when you don’t. I do not understand it myself; but there is something wrong, Adonis, my boy . . . something wrong, and somehow . . .

I think things will never be quite the same again.'

Before the train glided slowly into Durham Station, master and dog were sleeping the sleep of the weary.





CHAPTER VII.

THE rays of the setting sun, piercing the frosty air, gleamed luridly on every dome and minaret of grand old 'Mother' Moscow. The bell suspended in the white tower of Ivan Veliki was thrilling the entire city, far beyond the Kremlin gates, with its deep continuous voice. There was no sound of metallic concussion, but one great unbroken hum vibrated over all, like the buzz of some huge-winged insect. It was a feast-day, and the Metropolitan was about to bless the people from the jewelled altar-steps of the cathedral. Prince and pauper, soldier and insolent official passed

beneath the red arch of the Holy Gate together, hurrying towards the already over-filled cathedral. Passing into the shadow of the sacred portal, each bared his head and humbly carried his hat in both hands until he was through the arch, for this token of respect must be paid by infidel and Christian alike. High up in the crumbling brickwork hung the holy picture, from whence the Saviour's mild and loving eyes gazed down upon the ignorant multitude.

The shop-keepers in the Slavonski Bazaar were busy closing their little narrow booths, knowing that their commerce was finished for the day.

From one of the arcaded passages there emerged an old man, bent and limping. He was clad in a long garment confined at the waist by an old leather strap. His high boots, reaching almost to the knee, were innocent alike of grease or blacking. On his head was a black astrakhan cap, all glossy

with newness, and in his hand he carried five or six more. This type is common enough in Moscow—the man was an itinerant vendor of astrakhan caps, and, like the rest of his kind, was quite ready to take that from his head to offer to any would-be purchaser.

As he came out of the Slavonski Bazaar, he turned his head as if a dog should have been at his heels ; then beneath his shaggy curls of grizzling brown he smiled a little grimly.

Painfully he made his way across the broad market-place, not in the direction of the Holy Gate, but towards the marvellous Basil.

Opposite this, the most lovely building ever erected to the glory of God by a man who knew not His love, the old hat-seller stood and gazed. For greater convenience he laid his cone of fur-caps upon one arm, and raised his two hands to the crook of his staff.

The eyes that rested on the glorious curve

of varying cupola and minaret were strangely youthful and penetrating. Admiration for this triumph of Eastern architecture was expressed therein, but wonder there was not. It was as if the old man knew every line and turn, and was now gazing on them as one who bids farewell.

The sharp concise tread of an officious police agent sounded on the stones behind the old fellow ; but he never turned or heeded it.

He seemed lost in a reverie, wherein perhaps figured the grim personality of Ivan the Terrible, who had caused this same Basil to be built ; and then, when it was finished, seeing, despite his coarse and barbarous nature, that it was almost superhuman, had blinded for ever its nameless architect. But what should an old hat-seller know of these things ?

‘Thou wilt sell no caps here,’ said the obtuse police-spy at his elbow.

‘No?’ answered the old man quietly, without looking round.

‘No; go on, one way or the other.’

‘Then in Moscow one may not even look at a church?’ said the old man, turning to go.

‘No. I turned away an Englishman from here yesterday; and if an Englishman (for they see everything) may not look, surely thou mayest not.’

‘Same fellow, my man. Same fellow, you thickhead!’ muttered the old man in perfect English, as he hobbled towards the Holy Gate.

In passing through he reverently bared his head, looking sideways up with senile awe towards the sacred picture.

He shamled past the gates of the Imperial Palace, and stood for some moments beside the great bell, resting on its pedestal at the foot of Ivan’s Tower, silent for ever with a crack from base to summit.

The great bell overhead had ceased ring-

ing, but the air was still vibrating with a dull thrill of dying harmony.

The people were still thronging past with stupid awe-struck faces, crossing themselves occasionally as they passed a shrine built into the wall, with a fervour which was piteously blind and ignorant. For religion here is conducted on the same principles as the enforcement of the law.

The old man looked at them with a strange quizzical philosophy, and from their dense and ignorant faces, rendered miserable by many generations of utter poverty and oppression, he raised his eyes to the gorgeous Imperial Palace behind them.

Then he shook his head, which showed a palsied readiness for such exercise, and wandered back past the brilliantly-painted railings and black-and-white-striped sentry-boxes, under the holy gateway into the vast market-place.

He ignored the officious limb of civic law,

who, however, kept a stern eye fixed upon him ; and, skirting the Slavonski Bazaar, the old hat-seller passed out of the Kremlin.

He quickened his shambling pace, but stopped suddenly in one of the narrower streets of New Moscow. A blue letter-box was fixed to the wall, and upon this he laid his stock of fur caps, separating them and shaking out the little black curls of hair with a practised hand. He arranged and sorted his diminutive stock in trade for some time, till the street was clear of passers-by. Then he slipped one hand into the breast of his long coat, and produced a letter. After glancing at the address he dropped it into the box, and murmured in English :

‘ There goes the last link ! I am off at last, and a week ago to-day I was putting up scenery at Broomhaugh !’

When the Post-office collector came, shortly afterwards, with his bag to clear the box, the old hat-seller was still examining

his wares, one of which he pressed upon the letter-carrier with a little clumsy pleasantry about the cap coming in useful when he received his pension. The old fellow spoke the guttural coarse Russian of the South.

Beneath his shaggy brows he watched his letter fall from the box into the canvas bag, and then turned away towards the high-road leading to Nijni Novgorod.

Thus Winyard Mistley turned his back on civilization, and started on his lone and wearisome journey of three thousand miles. The hurried leave-taking at the porch had been indeed a farewell, despite his cheery assurance to the contrary. Twenty-four hours after leaving Broomhaugh, he was on board a little merchant steamer gliding slowly down the Humber. An interview at Whitehall, a second at the War Office, and he had received his instructions. No outfit, no letters of introduction, no baggage. 'Was there anything to delay his starting imme-

diately ?' he had been asked. ' No—nothing !' The answer was not very prompt—there was the shadow of hesitation in it ; and for a moment, the white-haired anxious soldier who had asked the question relaxed the coldness of his official demeanour.

' It is sometimes better,' the old worn-out traveller said, ' to find that there is no time to say good-bye—do you not find it so ?'

' Yes—perhaps it is better so,' Winyard had replied with a sudden smile, and all was said and done.

And now that was all over—a mere memory of the past. The hurried preparations, the difficult letter to Mrs. Mistley, written at a club amidst the laughter and merry-making of men who would have been silent enough had they known. The uncomfortable farewell at King's Cross Station, and the last grave pressure of the hand from the two old travellers, who, partial strangers

as they were, had made a point of seeing him off.

Now he was fairly at work, and his old confident delight in the attendant difficulties was returning to him. In the midst of enemies he calmly defied them all, meeting treachery with an apparently rash straightforwardness, pitting against their suspicious watchfulness a keen and educated discernment which was infinitely superior. Alone, unrecognised by his country, and unprotected by her avowed interest, he set forth into those weird untrodden deserts of the far East, where untrustworthy fanatics are restlessly scheming with and against the unscrupulous envoys of Russia ; where treason and falsehood are in the very air, and where truth forms no part or portion of manly honour.

Leaving behind him home, moderate wealth, and perhaps love, he was facing discomfort, deprivation, and the probability of

a lonely miserable death. It is a hopeless task to seek for human motives. Who can say why thousands of Englishmen deliberately choose a wandering life, when ease and comfort are within their reach? It cannot be said that ambition alone drove Winyard Mistley to take this journey, for he was fully aware that no public reward can be assigned for private service, in a country governed by the Press. He knew well the dangers that lay ahead, first in the semi-barbarous and wholly tyrannical country through which he was passing; and beyond, dangers of desert and rapid rivers, of burning sun and ice-cold nights, of ruthless nomads and treacherous schemers.

It was a match between educated cunning and ignorant, but the latter had the advantage of numbers.

What drove this refined Englishman to face the innumerable terrors and hardships of a journey in the untrodden East? Patriot-

ism. For patriotism is not dead, let cynics write what they like.

Winyard Mistley did not hesitate to risk his life on a journey to that unsettled land where, one day, will be fought the greatest fight the earth has ever quivered under ; where the Lion and the Tiger (dogged bravery and cunning courage) will stand side by side to repel the encroachments of the shambling Bear. And then will be seen to rise from the ashes of Ease and Indifference a very phoenix of Patriotism.

This is essentially an age of words ; we are a verbose generation, loving to sit at a table with closed window and crackling fire, and there to write on any subject that comes to the fore—of distant lands which we hardly know by name ; of peoples whom we have never seen, whose tastes and habits are strange to us—but action is not yet dead amongst us, as England will find when her hour of need has come.

There is a very present satisfaction in serving one's country with rifle on shoulder, beneath the shadow of a fluttering standard, to the sound of martial music. The cheers of the excited populace, the roll of the drum, and that terribly fascinating 'trub—trub' of a thousand trained feet, send a man forth to fight for his fatherland with a glowing heart. He feels that death is not so terrible after all with these red-coats around him, with the inspiration of patriotic music throbbing through his brain.

Winyard Mistley had none of these. Surely his was a higher standard of courage than that of the trained soldier. He followed no chief; he was not forced on by men who depended on his leadership. No 'pomp and circumstance of war' was his, no cheering populace, no trusty comrade. Neither was his duty comprised in a blind obedience to superior orders, which if it may be somewhat galling to one man out

of five, is an intense relief to the other four.

Despite what he said to Marie Bakovitch, it was no hatred towards Russia that impelled him to devote his life to the study of her crooked politics. He was too much of a cosmopolitan to be influenced by such ignorant and insular prejudices as affect the ruck of untravelled and unread Englishmen. It is strange, in this enlightened nineteenth century, how many of our countrymen honestly believe that there is no land in the world equal to England, no soldiers equal to ours, no intellects so lofty as ours, no literature except ours. And these, also, men of education and some slight reading, though the latter has necessarily been confined to the writings of other Englishmen.

This curse of 'insularism' militates against England throughout the whole world, and will one day fall back upon our own heads in such a manner as to cause a very rude

awakening. Then, perhaps, it will be seen that the teaching of effete and bygone tongues, which we persist in considering more beautiful than those that have superseded them, is a mere folly. Then the fathers of sons will perhaps conceive the brilliant idea that because they know enough Latin to understand in some degree the maudlin prosings of fifteen hundred years ago, it is no reason why their sons should not be allowed to enter into the cultivated thoughts of modern writers, who (to their own detriment, no doubt) write in language only fit for Frenchmen, Germans, or Italians to read.

Travel is doing much for us, there is no doubt; and already there are glimmerings of light entering the brains of the more liberal portion of the rising generation. Already these are beginning to realize that this planet does not consist of England, with a few partially necessary countries existing around her, by her kind permission and endurance.

Winyard Mistley was neither blinded by national pride into a mistaken and vain-glorious confidence, nor subject to the pusillanimous misgivings of a mere alarmist. He looked at the entire question with the impartial eye of an outsider, having learnt from his many wanderings abroad to forget that he himself was an Englishman when judging of English affairs. No man could give fuller justice to Russia than he, and no man knew better the restless nature of the half-civilized men whom a sudden freak of fortune had raised to a position of power in the far South-east. For this reason he was feared and respected by them more, perhaps, than any member of the British Government. His strict honesty, combined with a certain blunt way of suddenly exposing to public ridicule unscrupulous schemes, which they thought to be unknown, was particularly repugnant to their overweening pride.



CHAPTER VIII.

QNLY a fortnight had elapsed since Winyard Mistley's departure from Broomhaugh, and Colonel Wright was already beginning to experience some anxiety at the absence of news from him. The old soldier, too impulsive for a diplomat, grumbled aloud at the prolonged silence of his pupil. He knew that there must be good reason for it; but felt at the same time that he, of all people, might reasonably expect to be kept fully posted as to Winyard's movements.

Lena, whose spirits were singularly high (in an unusual *jerky* manner), watched her

father in his anxiety, wondering whether there were any real cause for it ; and Mrs. Wright, for reasons best known to her own maternal heart, watched Lena.

On the fifteenth morning the tardy letter arrived at last, having been forwarded by Mrs. Mistley from Paris. The Colonel read it slowly, for it was written in pencil on the torn-out page of a sketch-book. Then he turned the paper over again, and read it aloud :

‘ DEAR COLONEL,

‘I leave Moscow this afternoon, walking to the first station on the Nijni line. I am fairly off now—right in the heart of the country, and no one the wiser. Give me twelve months before you think of getting anxious, *eighteen* before you show your anxiety, and *twenty-one* before you send Wilson and Bates. Let them come unknown to the newspapers. If either of them be unable to come (I do not anticipate un-

willingness), some one else must. Do not on any account send one man alone. If I should not get back, and Wilson fails to hear of me, shed a friendly tear, but shed it in private ; our white-coated friends must not hear of it. By-the-bye, on second thoughts, please tell your ladies and the mater *all* about Marie Bakovitch. It will be safer. Do not lose sight of the mater, and take care of the respectable Adonis.

‘ Yours,

‘ W. M.’

The Colonel’s voice quivered a little as he finished reading.

Lena, slowly sipping her coffee, looked over her cup towards her father, with an interested but somewhat critical expression on her face.

‘ It is to be hoped,’ she said, ‘ that “ the respectable Adonis ” will appreciate the interest shown in his welfare.’

‘ Ye-es,’ said the Colonel vaguely, as he

slowly folded the letter. 'There !' he continued more energetically, as he placed it in his pocket—'you know as much as I do !'

Mrs. Wright slowly raised her eyes from her plate, and looked across the table towards her husband.

'Except . . .' she said suggestively, ' . . . in the matter of Marie . . . something or other.'

'Marie Bakovitch . . . yes, I must tell you about her. It would interest you, I think.'

Lena was still sipping her coffee indifferently.

'Marie Bakovitch,' continued the Colonel deliberately, 'is a young lady, beautiful and . . . accomplished. Two years ago she undertook to remove me from the face of the earth. She is what is called in some countries a patriot, and that is the form taken by her patriotism. Of course she belongs to several crack-brained societies and one of these was

kind enough to inform me by letter that I was condemned ; at the same time warning Mistley. He had the effrontery to reply to their formal communication, but I did not see the letter. Since then I have heard nothing more about it. Some time later Mistley received a threatening letter, and since then this girl has followed him like a shadow . . .’

Lena slowly set her cup down upon the table. With one white finger she began polishing the top of the silver coffee-pot with peculiar attention, like a child who is being gently scolded.

‘By some means,’ continued the Colonel, ‘he turned the wrath of these mistaken patriots from my head, and called it down upon his own. Marie Bakovitch followed him to Walso, and actually attempted to shoot him, down at the Broomwater one day when he was fishing. She missed him, and then fainted into his arms—in the most

confiding manner, Winyard said. The fellow managed to make even *that* into a funny story. He generously kept the whole affair quiet, and succeeded in getting the girl away from Walso. She even promised to leave England, but whether she will keep her promise or not, I cannot say. He was afraid that they might have been seen together, and that gossip would get about, so he asked me to tell you the truth about it.'

The two ladies were silent. Lena bent her head over the coffee-pot as if she were short-sighted, and wished to see the result of her prolonged polishing. It was only when he looked across the table and met his wife's eyes that Colonel Wright fully realized what Winyard Mistley had done in taking this danger upon himself.

'And you knew this all along,' said Mrs. Wright presently, with gentle severity. She was recalling, with the unerring memory of a woman for such details, the thousand passing

incidents in which Winyard Mistley and his chief might have betrayed their anxiety concerning Marie Bakovitch and her presence in Walso.

Women usually consider that they have the monopoly of the minute diplomacy of everyday life. They love to comment on the clumsiness and want of tact with which they are pleased to endow their husbands, brothers, and sons ; and when a revelation comes to them, as it had now come to Mrs. Wright, the result is a trifle humiliating. Most women learn sooner or later in their lives that the men whom they pride themselves upon blindly leading, allow themselves to be led just so far as suits them, and not one inch beyond.

Lena must have been thinking of this also, for presently, without looking up, she said :

‘ I cannot understand it at all. If I had a secret like that upon my mind, I should be miserable. I should not be able to think

of or take an interest in anything else ; whereas you and . . . Winyard . . . were as innocent as lambs. You took an interest in the theatricals, in the trivial details of everyday existence . . . it makes one feel like a child to whom the nurse talks upon topics likely to amuse, and never thinks of what she is saying.'

Before Colonel Wright had time to reply, the door was thrown open by the square-shouldered butler, and Laurance Lowe entered the room, closely followed by Charles Mistley.

' We met on the doorstep,' said the younger man ; while his companion silently shook hands with Colonel and Mrs. Wright, and kissed Lena.

' Early visit,' added Laurance Lowe, by way of apology.

' I am glad you have come,' said the Colonel genially. ' I have heard from Winyard at last !'

Then he rose and handed the letter to Charlie. The young sailor took the paper, and walked to the window.

‘Excuse me,’ he said, with a grave smile towards Mrs. Wright before he unfolded it. Leaning against the woodwork of the window he read the letter through, slowly and deliberately. Then he came forward and gave it back to the Colonel, with a word of thanks.

Before handing it to Laurance Lowe, the old soldier unfolded the paper and examined it critically ; then looking up suddenly at Charlie, he said :

‘It is such men as this who leave their mark upon a generation !’

Charlie smiled in his lazy, grave way.

‘Yes,’ he replied ; ‘the energetic ones.’

Laurance Lowe was holding out his hand for the letter, patiently and without any show of curiosity. As previously hinted, he was essentially an unemotional being, never displaying curiosity or surprise.

‘Colonel,’ said Charlie, ‘I have brought you the new sheet-map I promised to procure you. It is a large affair, so I gave it to Jarvis to take into your study.’

‘Thanks—many thanks!’

‘And,’ continued the young sailor, ‘and . . . I have come to say good-bye.’

Laurance Lowe slowly raised his eyes. They rested on Charles Mistley long enough to notice that the young fellow carefully avoided meeting Lena’s quick glance, and instantly turned away again.

‘Good-bye!’ echoed Lena. ‘Surely *you* are not going away now?’

‘Yes,’ replied Charlie quietly. ‘I have been appointed to the *Curlew*, on the Mediterranean station.’

Mrs. Wright had risen, and was standing at the window with her back towards them. She turned her head.

‘I shall be very sorry to lose you, Charlie,’ she said softly.

Lena said nothing. She was engaged in administering small pieces of toast to Adonis. She could not be expected to express surprise, as Charles Mistley had foreseen this appointment, and had spoken of it frequently.

Presently the gentlemen adjourned to the study to smoke cigarettes and inspect the new map. When it was spread out on the table, the Colonel took a pen and made a little cross over the word 'Moscow,' writing underneath it the date of Winyard Mistley's letter. With dotted lines he followed the track of the railway to Nijni Novgorod; then turning south, traced the broad flow of the Volga. Carefully he portioned off each day with a line drawn horizontally.

As the mariner traces his course upon the chart, so Colonel Wright continued, in the months that followed, to make this imaginary track across Russia. Down the Volga to Astrakhan, by road from Astrakhan to Petrovsk, and from thence across the Cas-

pian Sea to Krasnovodsk. Each day's journey was portioned off scientifically, each day the little dotted line advanced farther into the unknown East.

The old traveller never spoke much to his wife or daughter concerning this map, doubtless considering it a detail of his profession necessarily of small interest to ladies. He was not aware that day by day a fair young face was bent over the gray paper, and a dainty finger followed with absorbing interest the growth of the black line.





CHAPTER IX.

THE weeks passed slowly on. Autumn blustered out, and winter stole in with a keen black frost that enveloped London in fog and darkness. The muddy streets were dangerous, the air pestilential ; and yet people lived on merrily enough, performing their daily tasks, extracting their daily enjoyment from existence.

At Broomhaugh it was a very different matter. A great and wondrous silence reigned there—even the voice of the Broom-water was checked. The huge brown boulders grew hoary with long ice-beards,

and as the water fell day by day, little platforms of ice stood out from stone and bank. Then came a great fall of snow, and the dark pine-trees were at rest. They could not sigh and moan at the passage of every biting breeze beneath this real and tangible burden of chilly white, for pine-trees are like men who make a great moan when things are passable, but bear with manfully-closed lips the weight of a real sorrow. In the pine-woods, however, as in the world, a sharp crack sometimes rings out, followed by a sickening rustle of falling strength, and the older trees hug their close-knit bark, gently whispering to each other that such and such a sapling has given in at last. But Broom-haugh was deserted ; the old gray house was silent, and the snow lay in virgin purity over all the land.

Through that long winter Lena was her father's constant companion. Indeed, the family of three wondered then how they had

been able to manage life so well apart when the Colonel was away. The old soldier was very busy with both official and private writings, and in Lena he found a bright and intelligent assistant. Article after article flowed from his pen, and in review and magazine the weight of his experience soon found appreciation.

Also, there was much reading to be done. As an old sailor loves to hear about the great waters in quaint sea-sounding words, so the traveller loves to follow the wanderings of others 'when travelling-days are done.'

During those darksome months Lena grew very wise in Eastern lore. The Colonel's map was now common property, and his daughter openly displayed her interest in the ever-lengthening dotted line. Sometimes, even, she was consulted as to the journey to be adjudged. Thus, in the quiet study, father and daughter travelled East-

ward together, by piteous little stages of one-eighth of an inch or so per diem, till at length the end of the black line touched the B of Bokhara ; and the Colonel talked of gilded domes and minarets, of crumbling walls and narrow gateways built of the little flat bricks manufactured of old—‘without straw.’

Now this was all very fine and exceedingly pleasant—this prosperous journey devoid of hardship and danger—to be taken up after a good night’s rest in a warm bed, followed by an honest English breakfast ; but there came no news of the real traveller, who had become, as it were, a tiny insect crawling over the vast map.

Lena, from her reading, knew that there are occasional opportunities, even in the farthest desert, of sending back a few words by some return caravan or party of travellers ; but no sign came from Winyard Mistley. Since the letter from Moscow his silence had

been as that of one who is in the grave. At times this imaginary journey seemed to Lena to be nothing else than a pitiful farce ; but she could not make up her mind to mention this thought to her father, who showed no anxiety.

The Colonel was well aware that some news should by this time have reached England ; but his simple trust in Mistley's powers was very great.

‘ If *any* man can do it, Mistley can ! ’ he had said vaguely, one day when the soft dampness of the atmosphere seemed to speak of coming spring. This was no reply to some remark of Lena's, but merely in answer to his own thoughts. The Colonel was leaning against the mantelpiece gazing dreamily at his own boots, while Lena stood with her back towards him, bending over the map. She waited for more, but her father remained silent.

The summer brought an event in Lena's

life of some importance. This came in the shape and form of a young gentleman named Walter Haughton, who had been her playmate in former years. But the playmate and the young man were two very different beings. There was nothing to be quoted against Walter Haughton—his manners were perfect, if somewhat too self-possessed—his appearance decidedly in his favour ; but he invariably inspired a sudden distrust in the minds of experienced men and women of the world. The former called him a ‘bad egg ;’ the latter said he was a rolling - stone. Young ladies who aspired to ‘fastness’ considered him great fun, and no two young men had the same opinion regarding him. When he presented himself at Seymour Street and talked of old times, throwing in a few sincere words of tribute to the memory of his mother, who had been a friend of Mrs. Wright’s, he was received with much kindness. Certain rumours of wild doings were kindly forgotten

by Mrs. Wright, and the new page was universally looked upon as spotless. Indeed, Walter Haughton now set up his stall in Vanity Fair as an irreproachable young man, and did very well. This took place early in the summer, and the new venture proved so successful that Haughton honestly determined to adopt for the future the paths of virtue. Mrs. Wright did her very best to aid him in this. She introduced him to her friends, took him out to houses where young men were required, and to his credit it may be recorded that she never had cause to regret having done so.

When, however, Haughton's visits to Seymour Street became monotonous in their regularity, and when he appeared at every ball, reception, or soirée, Mrs. Wright began to experience misgivings. The 'prodigal,' as she was pleased to call him, did not assuredly come to see her; it must therefore be Lena. However, for some reason

the good lady was less anxious now regarding her daughter than she used to be. Also the relationship between Haughton and Lena seemed to make no progress—the keenest-eyed old dowager could not have detected anything more than mere friendship, and that of the description generated more by the force of circumstances than from natural selection.

However, this young gentleman called one July afternoon, and as soon as he entered the room Mrs. Wright saw that there was something different in his manner. His usual and somewhat remarkable self-possession was not there, and his blue eyes were less shifty than of old ; but, on the other hand, they were entirely devoid of a reckless merriment which was not without its fascination. Mrs. Wright was no mean scholar at human nature's great academy ; she could read faces as well as most people ; but Walter Haughton's manner puzzled her that morn-

ing, and continued to puzzle her until Lena entered the room, and then the meaning of it was clear.

Lena was dressed in readiness to go out. She had made an appointment with some girl-friends to meet at a picture-gallery, which they were desirous of 'doing' before the fashionable hour. Walter Haughton promptly proposed accompanying her as far as the gallery, which she acceded to without demur.

Mrs. Wright saw them to the door, which she closed after them.

'Poor prodigal!' she murmured to herself, as she slowly mounted the stairs. 'Poor . . . prodigal! he is as sure of his failure as I am.'

Lena came home rather earlier than Mrs. Wright had expected. The gallery had certainly not been exhaustively inspected. The good lady glanced up from her work for a moment as her daughter entered the room,

but made no remark regarding her quick return.

Lena walked to the window, and stood with her back towards her mother, looking out on to the dusty, sunlit street. She had not removed her trim little hat, and the fingers on the window were gloved.

Then Mrs. Wright laid aside her work, and softly went to her daughter's side.

'Mother,' said the girl wearily, without looking round—'mother, why is it that some people's lives seem destined to be failures from beginning to end?'

Mrs. Wright slipped her arm round her daughter, and they stood side by side, looking vaguely into the street.

'My darling,' she said presently, 'I think *we* are meant to shape our lives as unselfishly as we can ; but . . . still . . . we should not look too much on either side—there are so many to assist that the sacrifice of ourselves may be of little ultimate good.'

‘Walter—asked me to be his wife.’

‘Yes, darling.’

‘Do you think it would have been of any good?’

‘No, Lena ; I think it is best as it is. Poor Walter ! luck does seem to be against him . . . but he is young yet. People are not unfortunate *all* their lives . . . unless they have themselves to blame.’

The girl made no reply to this. Her confidence in her own strength of mind had been somewhat shaken that afternoon. Like many a ne’er-do-well, Walter Haughton had a most harmonious voice ; and never had its tones been so pathetic, so musical, as they had sounded in her ears an hour ago. She actually shivered as she remembered how near to hesitation she had been.

‘There is . . . Mr. Lowe,’ she said suddenly, but without evincing surprise ; and with a little inclination of her head she indicated the direction in which she was looking.

Beneath them, Laurance Lowe was crossing the street. His active gait looked, even more than usual, out of keeping with his bent white head. A passing suggestion of pain flickered across Mrs. Wright's face—perhaps she was mentally withdrawing the statement she had just made.

A few minutes later, Lowe entered the room. He kissed Lena with a strange old-fashioned respect, and turned to shake hands with her mother, who had advanced to meet him less hurriedly. As his hand met Mrs. Wright's, he raised his shaggy brows, and looked at her for a moment. There was distinctly a question in his quiet eyes, and in hers there was, as distinctly, an answer to it.

'Any news?' he had asked, and the reply to it was:

'No news.'

Each time these two met he asked that same question, and hitherto that same anxious answer had been given.



CHAPTER X.

EARLY in September, Mrs. Wright received a letter from Gibraltar, of which the address was in an unknown handwriting. Charles Mistley's letters had of late borne the Gibraltar post-mark, but this could not be from him. Before she had read the first page, she exclaimed :

‘ Charlie is coming home !’

‘ Hooray !’ said the Colonel.

‘ Oh . . . I am so glad !’ said Lena, with more fervour than the occasion would appear to demand. But Mrs. Wright looked grave.

‘ He has broken his arm,’ she said, and then she suddenly laughed.

The letter, which was from an officer of Charles Mistley's ship, was a very humorous production, purporting to be written at Charlie's dictation, but interlarded here and there with observations from the writer's own fertile brain. Although the news was bad, it was so cheerfully imparted that the bright side of it was alone presented.

'At any rate,' said Lena, when the letter had been read aloud, 'he is coming.'

'Yes . . . he is coming,' replied her mother thoughtfully, almost anxiously.

Charles Mistley had been the only member of the little circle who had refused, persistently and continually, to acknowledge any feeling of anxiety at his brother's silence. His letters, written in the Mediterranean, seemed to have caught the sunshine and joyousness of that favoured sea. No thought of anxiety, no suspicion of doubt, was allowed to find place in the closely-written pages. More than a year had elapsed since Win-

yard's departure, and the silence was yet unbroken. War had at times appeared imminent, and then from mere lack of interest had lapsed into peace again. Great storms had passed over the world—revolutions, murders, and bloodshed—but Charles Mistley's faith had never wavered. The black line on Colonel Wright's map had turned back; it had even regained civilization, and yet no word was forthcoming. Despite this, Charlie laughed at anxiety. Worst of all, Winyard's name had gradually been dropped from conversation at the house in Seymour Street. The topic was tacitly avoided, as we avoid the mention of those dear names which gain no answer now.

It was to this that Charles Mistley was coming home.

A few days after the arrival of the letter he presented himself in Seymour Street. Although he had given no notice of his coming, he was fortunate enough to find

everyone at home. There was, however, another visitor in the room when he arrived. This was a brother officer of Colonel Wright's, who had stopped his cab in passing through Seymour Street to call and leave two brace of partridges.

This old sportsman was holding forth upon the details of his sport, when Charles Mistley entered the room in his usual unobtrusive manner, walking with a slow strong step devoid of any lightheartedness. The greetings and introduction, over, Charlie, with true British instinct, displayed an immediate interest in the partridges which were lying on the hearthrug.

‘You have been shooting, sir,’ he observed.

‘Yes; but I secured a poor bag.’

Lena smiled openly.

‘That is a good bird,’ continued Charlie, in the same make-yourself-at-home tone of voice, daintily holding up the largest partridge by one leg.

‘Yes,’ replied the General, smiling vaguely.

‘I am afraid I am a poor sportsman,’ continued the big sailor, meditatively placing his head on one side in order to examine the bird more minutely. ‘I could not stand a keeper by my side ; and in the absence of some one to keep me up to the mark, I should probably sit down on the lee side of a hedge and think the sunny hours away.’

His slow enunciation conveyed an impression of pleasant laziness, such as one rarely meets with in these hurried days. He looked past the bird at Lena, and met her eyes fixed full upon his face with a smile of ill-disguised amusement. He quietly smiled back, and proceeded to keep the ball of conversation rolling, descanting with lazy gravity upon the utmost trifles.

At last the old sportsman took his leave, and the Colonel accompanied him to the door. When the latter returned, the fact had apparently slipped his memory that he

had shaken hands with Charlie before, for he went through the ceremony again, taking Charlie's left hand in his right somewhat awkwardly.

'How is the arm?' he asked, glancing at the sling, which the young sailor somehow managed to wear so that it failed to attract attention.

'The arm is getting on splendidly, thank you,' he replied, in rather a constrained tone. The Colonel had left the door open, and now the young sailor crossed the room to close it. He stooped in order to see that the bolt had acted properly, and then he turned and faced Colonel Wright.

'I have news,' he said quietly, 'of Win-yard.'

'Ah!' exclaimed the old soldier, rising from the seat he had just resumed. 'Tell me all about it—news at last, thank God!'

'It is a long story,' began the other, in his slow manner.

‘Then be quick with it,’ interrupted Mrs. Wright, with an impatient laugh. A little ‘catching’ sigh of relief came from Lena’s corner of the room.

‘Let us hear it all,’ said the Colonel, pointing to a chair.

But Charlie appeared to prefer standing. He took his station at the corner of the mantelpiece, and while he was speaking he fidgeted with the ornaments there, taking them up and setting them down again one after the other. He told his story with characteristic simplicity and shortness.

‘The day before yesterday,’ he said, ‘I was at the club at Plymouth, reading a paper or something, when a fellow came up and said, “Commander Mistley,” in a casual sort of way, and held out his hand. I shook it, and let him have it back ; and then he said, “I am Henry Akryl.” I was none the wiser, so I said “Yes” in a vague way . . .’

‘I know exactly how you said it,’ interrupted Lena, with a little laugh.

‘Well, it ultimately transpired that he dined with us one day in the Persian Gulf. He is an Eastern authority—writes books, or reads inscriptions or something. Then he told me his story. In January he was at Kizil Arvat. One day he was in the bazaar, and, of course, was being pestered by the scum of the place, who wanted him to buy rubbish of every description. He is the sort of man who never buys curiosities, and he finally got rid of them all except one fellow, who followed him most persistently even out of the bazaar. He turned down a narrow street where the grain-merchants have their stalls; but this fellow still followed him, and kept thrusting his wares forward. His particular line of business was old jewellery, Moscow crosses, cheap bangles from Kieff, and that sort of thing. He whined out a prayer for charity in the most aggravating

manner, and once or twice Akryl struck his hand aside. Suddenly, however, he ceased whining, and said in perfect English, "Don't look round—don't stop; but listen to what I tell you." Akryl seems to be a sharp fellow, for he walked on without showing any surprise. Then the jewellery-merchant went on: "When you get back, go or write to Colonel William Forster Wright, 109, Seymour Street, London. Remember the address. You had better write it down when you get back to the caravansérai. *Don't* look round. Tell him you met an Englishman in Central Asia—to-day—that is all." Akryl said, "Are you Mistley?" and the fellow replied, "Shut up." Akryl bought a cross . . .'

Charlie stopped speaking. His thumb was hooked into his waistcoat-pocket, as if making sure that something was there. His eyes were fixed on the hearthrug—a tiger-skin, the stripes of which he was following

with the toe of his boot. Suddenly he raised his lazy blue eyes, direct and with a certain deliberation, from the floor to Lena's face. He caught her eyes fixed wistfully on his hand. Then he moved slightly, and addressed Colonel Wright.

‘It sounds like Win, does it not?’

‘Yes,’ replied the old traveller, slowly pulling at his moustache. ‘Yes—that was Win.’

‘Akryl saw nothing but his hand,’ continued the sailor. ‘A small brown hand he said it was—almost the hand of a Tartar, but somewhat stouter, with compact fingers and light-coloured nails. I asked him for further details, but that was all he could tell me. He had landed in England two days before I saw him, and was on the point of starting off to join the Fez Expedition, and was just going to sit down and write to you when he caught sight of me and remembered that I was . . . Win's brother.’

‘It is not much,’ said Colonel Wright slowly, ‘but it explains a good deal. He ought to have been across the Kizil Arvat desert before January. No doubt he has had difficulties to contend with which we did not quite foresee.’

The old soldier was no adept at dissimulation. His manner implied disappointment, and in each heart there was a vague conviction that this news was not satisfactory. It was no explanation of the subsequent silence.

‘And now,’ said Mrs. Wright, cleverly breaking the uncomfortable silence, ‘let us hear about yourself. How did you break your arm?—what are you going to do with yourself?—how long leave have you, etc., etc.?’

‘O . . . h! I suppose I shall moon about, get up in the morning, go to bed at night, and take my meals regularly.’

‘Which,’ said Lena severely, ‘is his definition of a human existence. Charlie, you are

as bad as ever—as hopelessly lazy, as incorrigibly unsatisfactory.’

Charlie bowed with grave mockery.

‘No,’ said Colonel Wright, who was a wonderfully reliable judge of men. ‘No ; he is not that. He is simply a humbug ; he is pleased to assume laziness because it pays. He dawdles his life away because he is a philosopher. There are few books he has not read—few subjects upon which he could not tell us something ; but he prefers to sit idly by and listen to a futile discussion when a few words from him would settle it at once. He is a shop-keeper who stores his best wares beneath the counter, and leaves the window empty.’

Charles Mistley met this accusation with a mellow laugh, in which the ladies joined.

‘I begin to regret,’ he said, ‘that I ever left the *Curlew*, for I was treated on board with the respect due to the gold lace upon my sleeve ; but still, if anyone else

wishes to add a few remarks, now is the time. I have no friends, I have not even the protection of a mother's love, as that respected lady does not arrive from France till to-morrow ! I have just taken chambers for her and myself in Bedford Place !

‘Bedford Place—again !’ exclaimed Mrs. Wright.

‘Yes, Bedford Place again,’ he replied. ‘I think the mater likes the busy rattle of the cabs.’

‘What leave have you ?’ asked Colonel Wright.

‘Four months, Colonel. Four months, with the probability of an extension to six, according to the doctor's report.’

‘You have not told us how it happened,’ said Lena.

‘Carelessness,’ replied the young fellow, with a shrug of the shoulders.

‘On your part ?’

‘No, on the part of some one else. A man

was lowering a boat, and the rope slipped—a thing that might happen at any moment. The boat was full of men, who would have been shot into the water if two of us had not stopped it.’

‘Who was the other?’ asked the Colonel.

‘The man who wrote home for me.’

‘I thought there was something in that fellow, despite his foolery!’ said the old soldier thoughtfully.

When Charles Mistley left the house shortly afterwards, there was in his mind a vague half-formed sense of misgiving. It was almost a prescience of coming evil. Lena was different; there was something in her manner which had no sympathy with the Lena of olden days. His memory went back to the time when she, little else than a child, had been pleased to make him her friend, her confidant, almost her brother; when he had laughingly taught her to dance, and had skilfully guided her through the

little ball-room dangers that surround a lovely girl in her early youth. All this he thought of, and followed through it the natural growth and development of her mind—making every allowance for outward influence, giving full credit to maternal care. Although his mode of life had not afforded much opportunity for the study of such matters, the young sailor knew that there is no change so great in the nature of human beings as that which may, and often does, come to a girl between the ages of seventeen and twenty-four. It is during that period that all the infinite possibilities of good, all the chances of evil, are on the balance. In those years a woman realizes the object of her life, for it is then that love comes to her—love with its dazzling light of happiness, too perfect for mortal realization or enjoyment.

If love had come to Lena, and Charles Mistley thought it had, what he saw was

not a direct result of its influence. There was something else, something beyond his powers to divine, and which he did not at the moment attempt to define. From whence the thought had come he could not tell, what passing word or glance suggested it he could not determine, but he only knew that Lena was concealing something from her mother. A change had come over the understanding that existed between these two. So slight was it and so intangible, that if Charles Mistley had not been much keener and much more observant than he pretended to be, he would never have detected it.

Then he began to wonder if any other person had noticed it, and his thoughts naturally turned to Laurance Lowe. If the change was there, Laurance Lowe would know something of it; and from him information was only to be extracted by a great exercise of patience. So the young sailor

wandered on through the noisy, crowded streets, puzzling his brain over the most futile question man has ever set his mind upon—the question of a woman's heart.





CHAPTER XI.

WITH the advent of October came a succession of fogs. The atmosphere of London was such as only Londoners can breathe, yellow, noisome, and choking. The Wrights had talked of leaving town, and had even discussed the question of going abroad, but they were still in Seymour Street. The Colonel was busy, and seemed singularly averse to leaving town ; he was now getting seriously anxious about Winyard Mistley. Political events had occurred making it a matter of congratulation to the English Cabinet that they had a man of Mistley's discernment

and well-known ability in Central Asia ; but, at the Colonel's urgent request, his presence there had been kept a secret. The information, however, which he would undoubtedly be able to supply was daily becoming of greater necessity. Relating as it did to the feeling of certain tribes, more especially of the Saruks, respecting Russian aggression, it was such as only an expert in Eastern matters could supply. The Foreign Office authorities were compelled to bear much abuse, and to submit to unlimited badgering at the hands of officious and scantily informed Members, who took the opportunity of getting their august names set up in type by taunting the Ministers upon having no other sources of information than those of such notable unreliability as Russian official journals.

All this was of undoubted benefit to the solitary wanderer, and while it demonstrated to a nervous Cabinet the utter futility of half-measures and unrecognised envoys, it

militated greatly in favour of Winyard Mistley, whose devotion to the cause he had espoused was so obviously disinterested. But to Colonel Wright—to the man who, despite his gray hairs, felt that his place was not with the talkers who are left behind, but with the workers who go afield—it was particularly galling and terribly anxious work.

Instead of getting better, things grew worse. Vague reports, originating sometimes in Berlin, sometimes in St. Petersburg, appeared from time to time in the newspapers. These rumours spoke of trouble on the Afghan and Persian frontiers, of tribal disturbances and religious differences, of boundaries overstepped and agreements broken. Added to all this, Colonel Wright received a blow from a nearer source, which aggravated matters greatly, and rendered Winyard Mistley's silence almost unbearable.

One morning, late in October, he was sitting at his study-table. Before him lay the large sheet-map which Charles Mistley had brought more than a year ago. A fresh route had been worked out across it with dotted lines of red, commencing at Kizil Arvat on the day mentioned by the traveller Henry Akryl. The Colonel had just completed the dotted line as far as Bokhara, and was looking, in an absently methodical manner, at a calendar. The date written above the word Bokhara was terribly far back into the spring, more than six months ago.

The study-door opened softly, and although the old soldier heard it he did not move or turn. Two warm hands were laid upon his shoulders with that marvellous touch of a woman's loving fingers. They were peculiarly steady hands, as white as Lena's, but firmer and somewhat heavier.

‘Willy!’

‘Yes . . . old woman.’

‘Willy . . .’ repeated Mrs. Wright, looking out of the window into the hopeless dreariness of the October morning, ‘have you noticed any . . . difference—any change in Lena?’

The Colonel raised his eyes from the map and contemplated the chimneys of the opposite house for some moments in silence.

‘A change . . . old woman,’ he said slowly. ‘Perhaps there is a change—she is no longer a child now.’

‘No, it is not that; there is something else. She never allows it to appear, but . . . she is miserable. She is wearing herself to death. We must go away from London.’

It must be confessed that Colonel Wright had not given very much thought to the subject of his daughter’s happiness, nor was he very clever at divining a motive.

‘Is it,’ he asked, ‘anything to do with Charlie?’

Mrs. Wright appeared to be buried in

thought. She uttered no reply, but leaning forward over her husband's shoulder, she placed her finger on the map, where the red and black lines met beneath the word Bokhara.

A pitiful silence followed, such as leaves its mark upon the human heart.

'Good God!' whispered the Colonel.

Mrs. Wright went towards the window. The band that held back the folds of the heavy curtain was twisted and somewhat out of place. Slipping it off the hook, she deftly put it right, and then she turned her face slowly towards her husband.

'Then you think . . . he has failed,' she said in a monotonous voice.

The Colonel sat at the table with his chin resting on his folded hands. He was staring at the map.

'We should have heard from him six months ago,' was his reply.

Mrs. Wright crossed the room, and sat

down on a low chair near the fire. For nearly half an hour they remained thus. The white-haired old warrior and his comely gray-headed wife. After twenty-four years of married life they were lovers still ; and as they sat there—he looking out into the yellow mist, she watching the changeful flames as they leapt up and fell again—they were recalling the weary years of waiting that they had passed through, ignorant of the love that lay hidden in either heart. They were looking back to the first happy days of their married life, days rendered almost sacred by the touch of sorrow and the ever-living joy of watching over Lena, according all their parental love to the little girl who only knew her elder brother by the name that demanded a lowered voice.

‘With Lena,’ said Mrs. Wright presently, in a gentle voice, ‘it will be the matter of a lifetime . . . as indeed it is with most girls.’

‘Are you sure . . . there is no mistake about it?’

‘Sure,’ was the soft reply. ‘We have been able to watch over her—to keep sorrow and sickness away from her, but this . . . this love is beyond us, Willy. It is very hard that love should bring sorrow with it at once.’

‘Has Laurance Lowe said anything?’ asked the Colonel.

‘He has said nothing—he never speaks of that sort of thing, but he thinks the same as . . . I do.’

‘And—Charlie?’

‘I cannot understand . . . Charlie,’ replied Mrs. Wright. ‘His thoughts, his feelings, and his motives are alike a mystery to me.’

The Colonel opened one of the drawers of his writing-table, and taking Winyard’s letter from it, he spread the crumpled paper out upon the face of the map, and studied the writing, now growing dim and faded. The

formation of each letter was familiar to him ; he knew the writing as he knew his own.

A thicker wave of fog came slowly over the town, and the darkness lowered its veil over everything like a short winter's twilight. The printed names on the map were no longer visible, and yet the Colonel sat and gazed at it with Winyard's letter at his side.

Presently the door opened, and with a flood of warm light Lena entered.

'I verily believe you were both sound asleep!' she exclaimed with a cheerfulness which for some reason made her mother wince. 'Is it not dreadful—lamps at eleven o'clock in the morning!'





CHAPTER XII.

A MONTH had elapsed since Charles Mistle's return, and as yet he found himself no nearer an elucidation of Lena's altered manner than he had been on first discovering it. He had merely confirmed his original conviction that such a change existed. During those four weeks he had been much in the society of Laurance Lowe, as every frequenter of the Colonel's house was forced to be, but from him no information had transpired. True, they had talked together very little, both being silent men.

Laurance Lowe was not what the world is

pleased to call a hospitable man. This arose less, perhaps, from that sense of economy which is the result of a solitary existence, than from mental laziness. If he could have relied upon his guests to entertain each other, and make free use of what was placed before them, he would readily enough have returned such hospitality as he received ; but unfortunately his friends were not selected from among people capable of that difficult task. He would have been a generous man had he not been handicapped by a deeply planted aversion to thanks of any description. His own gratitude had never been known to express itself by more than the simple words 'Thank you ;' and amidst a shower of neatly turned phrases a hostess, somehow, usually remembered those formal words when others were forgotten. His generosity flowed in one channel only. To Lena, and to Lena alone, did he make presents. She, with that sweet womanly

sympathy which was perhaps the most precious inheritance received from her mother, knew exactly how to thank her white-haired admirer for these gifts. In many cases her appreciation never showed itself in words at all. A kiss, and a little touch of soft cool fingers upon the back of his corded hand—that was all at the time. Later on she would wear the gift, if it were jewellery—use it, if it were not ornamental—at the proper time and unostentatiously.

Charles Mistley was by no means ignorant of these traits in the character of Laurance Lowe, which the world naturally quoted against him with infinite gusto ; and when, therefore, he received a curtly worded invitation to dine at a club, he knew that there was some reason for it.

The meal was ludicrously characteristic of the two men. No word was exchanged, directly, between them. Occasionally a mutual friend lounged up to their table with

a nod of recognition, and made a remark to which both listened with grave attention, Charlie replying to it, while Lowe silently acquiesced. The old gentleman did not, however, do badly as regards the dinner, and the sailor did better—the waiter did best, in the lift-cupboard. ‘Lowe’s dinner-party’ was a standing joke at that club for some weeks afterwards.

After dinner they walked, by mutual and tacit consent, to Lowe’s chambers in Adelphi Terrace. Here they found coffee awaiting them. The rooms were furnished with a comfort somewhat rigid in its simplicity, but a bright fire was burning in the grate, and the warm lamplight softened down the barest corners.

Charles Mistley knew that his companion had something on his mind, but was content to wait with a patience as enduring as that of Lowe himself. Old barriers are hard to break, the stones of an old wall are closely

knit. Laurance Lowe was endeavouring to destroy a barrier which had grown harder and tougher as the years followed on. He made a little breach, but the barrier stood as firm as ever ; when the moment came he failed, and retired into his stronghold of silence. He had fully intended to speak openly for once, but the old habit of self-suppression was too strong for him.

He motioned his guest to a seat, and drew forward a low armchair for himself. Then he pushed a box of cigars across the table, so that Charlie could help himself without moving. After they had been sitting for some time, during which neither had commenced to smoke, the host seemed suddenly to recollect the coffee, for he rose, and with slow, certain movements, entailing no unnecessary clink or contact of china, he poured out two cups of a fragrant brew, and set the quaint old coffee-pot down before the fire to keep warm. Lowe never smoked a manu-

factured cigarette, and he now proceeded to roll one, subsequently tucking in the stray ends of tobacco carefully with the point of a cedar-wood pencil.

He smoked meditatively for some moments, then, without looking towards his companion, he uttered the single word :

‘Lena !’

Charles Mistley examined his cigar critically, and with much appreciation.

‘Ye-es,’ he replied gravely.

Then Lowe made a herculean effort.

‘I think,’ he said, ‘there is something wrong.’

The young sailor’s calm eyes were resting on his host’s immovable face. He might as well have attempted to read the features of a sphinx.

‘I have noticed it,’ he observed conversationally, ‘ever since I came back.’

The ice was broken, the first word was said, and now it surely was easy enough to

proceed. Only Englishmen could have failed so lamentably to take advantage of the situation. They actually continued smoking, and presently Charlie took a sip of coffee, which, slight though it may appear, as a mere incident, was enough to make matters worse.

‘Monsieur Jacobi . . .’ said Lowe suddenly. ‘Do you remember him?’

‘Jacobi!’ repeated the sailor thoughtfully. ‘Jacobi! There was a fellow of that name came one night to Mrs. Wright’s about two years ago.’

Lowe looked up. There was actually a gleam of life beneath his eyebrows.

‘That is the man.’

‘I remember him. A slippery-looking fellow—too sleek for my taste.’

Lowe nodded approval, and then said quietly :

‘He is in it somewhere.’

Charlie, completely puzzled, awaited with

extraordinary patience till the peculiar old gentleman should be pleased to vouchsafe further information. At length, after carefully depositing the ash of his cigarette in the fire, Lowe spoke again :

‘He came that night . . . with the Baroness de Nantille.’

‘Yes—I remember her.’

‘Lena is now having singing-lessons with the Baroness.’

Charlie felt convinced that his host was on the wrong track entirely, but refrained from saying so.

‘But . . . Jacobi,’ he began, ‘is hardly the sort of man . . .’

Lowe stopped him with a little ‘sniff’ of contempt and even derision, intended to convey his opinion of Monsieur Jacobi.

‘I have watched,’ said the old fellow, ‘and . . . I know Lena pretty well. You will find that Jacobi is in it somewhere.’

‘But he never goes to Seymour Street!’

‘No.’

‘Does she meet him at other houses?’

Lowe shook his head, and, leaning forward, took his coffee-cup from the mantelpiece. He emptied it at one long slow draught, and proceeded to make himself a second cigarette.

‘The singing-lessons,’ he observed suggestively. After lighting the cigarette he handed the match to Charlie, who had not observed that he had allowed his cigar to go out.

‘Then,’ said the young sailor, slowly and concisely, ‘the Baroness is in it also?’

Lowe nodded his head, and the ghost of a smile flickered across his face.

‘That is how we will get at it,’ he said.

‘Would it be of any use speaking to Lena herself?’ asked Charlie, who was a lover of straightforward ways.

Lowe shrugged his shoulders, and continued smoking meditatively.

‘Might try,’ he muttered doubtfully.

At last Charlie lost patience. He threw his cigar into the fire, and, rising from his seat, he stood in front of his host with his 'able' arm resting on the mantelpiece.

'I wish,' he said, without raising the level tones of his voice, but speaking rather hurriedly, 'that you would tell me what you suspect, what you know, and what you wish to know. If we are to help each other, there must be no reticence between us. Of what has been going on during the last year I know absolutely nothing. Mrs. Wright's letters have rarely alluded to . . . to Lena. The Colonel never wrote, Lena herself—rarely. My mother has been away in France. You, and you alone, are the only source of information that I have. I need hardly tell you that I am as uneasy about this matter as yourself. All I know is that Lena is different—all I suspect is that her mother is . . . no longer her confidante in everything.'

Laurance Lowe looked slowly up into his

companion's face, while the hand that held the cigarette shook a little.

‘Seen that too?’ he said interrogatively.
‘All I know is that since she has been taking these lessons there has been something wrong. Before that she was anxious . . . about your brother. We have all been anxious ; but now it is something more than anxiety.’

‘And what do you suspect?’

‘Seems to me that Jacobi has succeeded in establishing some influence over her. The girl is afraid of him.’

‘Lena goes to this woman's house for the lessons?’ asked Charlie.

‘Yes.’

‘Could we not get that altered?’ suggested the sailor, whose ideas were quick, though his speech was slow.

‘Tried it.’

‘You *have* tried it ; and who objected?’

‘Lena—piano or something.’

‘Did anyone make inquiries about the

Baroness de Nantille before this arrangement was made?' asked Charlie, who now turned and resumed his seat.

'Yes. She had a long and severe illness. Found, when she got better, that her property, which was all in Russia, had been confiscated, father banished, mother dead. Reduced circumstances, took to giving singing-lessons. She sings like an angel herself.'

'And have you done anything about Jacobi?'

'Lives by teaching violin—has many foreign friends. Eminently respectable; is supposed to be connected with several foreign political societies.'

'Um—m—m! In fact, he is a shady character,' suggested the sailor.

'Damned swindler!'

They sat and talked in the same aggravatingly 'unfinished' manner until late into the night. As Lowe's theory gradually expanded under Charles Mistley's patient inves-

tigation, it assumed a greater appearance of likelihood. Little details, added suggestively here and there, spoke volumes for the keenness of the old gentleman's powers of observation.

Silent men are not always mental sluggards, and Laurance Lowe was far from being such. He had gradually accumulated evidence bit by bit, and therewith had built up a very neat theory, surprising Charlie with its accuracy and perfect sequence.

He argued that as Mrs. Wright was no wiser than themselves on the subject of Lena's mental trouble, it must consequently be the result of some influence of which she knew nothing. Such influence could only be brought to bear upon Lena during her visits to the house of the Baroness de Nantille. The deduction was ingenious, and Charlie began to feel that Laurance Lowe's theory was, after all, the right one.

'I think you and I can settle Jacobi,' the

old man said, as he shook hands that night with the young sailor.

It was not until some time later that Charles Mistley recollected that there had been no question of taking Mrs. Wright into their confidence. He wondered at this a little, and then, with characteristic *laissez-aller*, came to the conclusion that Laurance Lowe doubtless had his reasons for it.





CHAPTER XIII.



GRIM silent desert—a great level horizon, lifeless, waterless, hopeless. The sun, a scorching ball of fire, was now almost touching the unbroken line of sand, and yet the heat he gave forth was as strong, as parching, and terribly merciless as that of the hottest autumn noon in England.

It is easy to talk of desert and rolling prairie, but to realize these from even the most graphic description is impossible. To sit by a comfortable fire with friends around one, and to realize the awful loneliness of a desert, is beyond the most far-reaching

imagination. The utter silence, the absence of created life, the terrible monotony which seems to speak of an unchangeableness extending over centuries—all these combine to act on the human brain as water acts upon a stone. The continual succession of cloudless mornings, cloudless noons, and cloudless nights is maddening in its serene beauty.

Each scrubby bush becomes at last an object of interest to the dazed traveller, something to be seen ahead, to be attained and left behind ; and yet when it is passed, there is no change in the hopeless horizon.

Over the trackless plain, a traveller was plodding painfully. One hand held the bridle of a limping horse, and on the poor brute's back was huddled a human form. This sorry cavalcade was steering towards the setting sun, a little to the northward of it.

The man who led the horse was slightly above the medium height ; a brown oval face

all caked with sand and dirt; his short pointed beard was dull and dusty. The huge turban on his head overshadowed the upper part of his face, and from beneath its shade there looked forth a pair of eyes dark with sullen despair. For two months they had looked upon nought but this same hopeless waste of barren sand. His skin was brown and hard like leather. Immediately beneath his eyes on either cheek was a red patch, where, the sand and dirt having been washed away, the skin was of brilliant red traversed by tiny cracks. These were caused by the constant brushing away of tears slowly drawn from his eyes by the irritation of the finest grains of sand. His slight moustache—brushed straight to either side, after the manner of the Tartars—did not hide his lips, which were almost black and perfectly dry, like the skin of a dusty raisin.

The man walked with the mechanical

swing of one who has been on the tramp for many months, and to whom walking is almost as easy as standing.

His foot-gear consisted of two pieces of untanned leather tied roughly over either instep; his wiry legs were bare, as he had looped his garment of soft unbleached cotton above his knees for greater convenience in walking. His arms, exposed by wide short sleeves, were brown and muscular; indeed there was no flesh upon them, merely corded sinews.

As the sun touched the horizon he took from the folds of his dress a small compass, and noted the exact spot where the contact took place. Then he glanced at his companion, but made no remark.

The man on horseback was of slighter build. He was all huddled up on the saddle, while his chin literally rested on his breast. His turban had come partly unrolled, and the end of it hung down over

his face. Both hands grasped the high pommel of the Tartar saddle ; his legs swung helplessly with each movement of the horse.

Since sunrise they had been on the march, and the horse, a mere skeleton with flapping ears and ungainly neck, showed fatigue more than the man walking at its side. Every now and then the poor brute stumbled forward as if about to drop from sheer weariness, and on each occasion the rider would slightly raise his head. For some hours perfect silence had fallen over the two men—their blackened lips were so hard and dry as to render articulation nearly impossible.

Suddenly the horse gave a great lurch forward, and failing to recover himself, collapsed sideways with a piteous groan.

The man at its head dropped the bridle, and with marvellous rapidity slipped his arm round his companion's drooping body.

‘Look out, Paul!’ he exclaimed hoarsely in Russian.

The rider made no attempt to assist himself, and as the horse fell his full weight came upon his companion, who, however, managed to step back and keep free from the poor brute’s dying kicks.

The man on horseback had actually been asleep, and as his companion laid him gently on the warm sand he slowly opened his heavy eyes.

‘Little father,’ he murmured. The corners of his mouth were closed with a deposit of black sand, and his lips hardly moved. The other put aside the loose end of the turban-cloth, and exposed a fair boyish face with languishing blue eyes, and a jaw so square as to be almost a deformity. The sun had burnt the fair skin in some places, leaving others pale, the result being a fantastic medley of browns, reds, and pinks.

‘Paul!’

‘Yes—little father!’

‘You are better for your sleep—is that not so?’ asked the other kindly.

But the younger man lay still, with his blue eyes half closed. His mouth was so parched that he could scarcely move his tongue.

‘We will divide what water there is left,’ said the elder man decisively. And he turned towards the prostrate horse.

From the saddle he detached a large gourd, which gave forth a terribly hollow sound, and after some searching in a loose bag that was suspended from his shoulder, he found a small drinking-vessel, cunningly manufactured from half a gourd.

He kept his back carefully turned towards his young companion as, kneeling on the ground, he extracted the wooden stopper.

Then the younger man painfully turned over on his face, and crawling along, he stealthily approached. As his companion

elevated his arm to raise the gourd he dragged himself forward, and watched the yellow water trickle into the vessel with eyes devoid of human feeling—they were like the eyes of a wild beast in sight of blood.

Slowly and deliberately the man poured all the water into the little vessel—he appeared to have forgotten the division of which he had spoken.

In setting down the gourd he glanced to one side, and caught sight of his companion lying on the ground at his side, with agonized eyes fixed upon the water-vessel.

Then he turned, and for some seconds their eyes met; in one face was steady determination, in the other a wavering weakness, rendered terrible by the brute-like agony of the eyes.

‘You drink your share first,’ said the younger man painfully.

‘I do not want any. I . . . am not

thirsty.' This with cracking lips and tongue as dry as leather.

The younger man attempted to raise himself, while the contortions of his discoloured face were terrible to look upon.

'You drink your share first !' he repeated hoarsely.

'Will you drink it all?' The elder man gently inclined the drinking-cup so that the water glistened on the edge.

'*Will* you drink it all?' he repeated.

One precious drop fell on to the sand, and the dampness of it vanished instantaneously.

'Will you drink . . . it . . . all?'

Then he held the cup to his companion's lips, and the water was gone.

He who did that deed to a dying man—beneath no gaze but that of his God—was Winyard Mistley. The young man was his servant.

Now he sat upon the sand and took his

servant's head upon his knees. The water loosened the man's tongue.

‘Little master,’ he said presently.

‘Yes, Paul.’

‘I want you to promise something to a dying man.’

Mistley made no answer ; he gently moved Paul's head to a more comfortable position.

‘When I am dead,’ said the youth, ‘take your knife and cut the flesh from off my arm—you must do this—you must keep yourself alive to get home to England, and then you can tell them that Paul Maritch did not die in vain ! You can tell the half-hearted ones that a true Nihilist died in joy, because he knew that his dead flesh was destined to keep you alive. You, the enemy of the Tyrant, the true friend of Holy Russia !’

Mistley could not conceal the look of horror that came into his eyes.

‘If,’ he said, in his mumbling articulation,

‘I went home and told them that tale, every Englishman would turn away from me in horror, saying that it would have been a hundred times better to have left my bones to bleach in the Khivan desert.’

The young Russian was half insensible ; he could not hear the heavy gasping of the expiring horse a few yards away from him.

Mistley gently let the dying man’s head drop on to the sand, and then he rose and stood beside the horse for some moments in silence. He raised his steadfast gray eyes to the heavens, now growing dull and of darker blue—he looked all round the level horizon. It seemed to him as if this were the whole world, and that he was alone in it; as if there was no world of civilization, of comfort and of luxury.

‘It may be brutal, but I think there is no sin in it,’ he murmured.

Then he knelt down on the sand, and with his knife he killed the horse.

Presently he cut out the tongue, and gave a mouthful of the warm flesh to his servant—he could not yet eat of it himself.

The cooler air now revived Paul Maritch. He turned his head to where Mistley lay on the sand at his side.

The Englishman heard the movement, and crawled closer to him.

‘It is coming . . . it is coming!’ whispered the Russian.

Then Mistley roused himself.

‘Paul, this is not like you,’ he said cheerfully, but it was a ghastly cheerfulness—‘this is not like you. Where is your determination? Where is your hope? After a good long rest, we will move on; I am strong enough to help you. Who knows—we may see the river by sunrise to-morrow.’

‘I will never see the sun rise again, little father.’

‘Nonsense, Paul! We will pull through

yet. It is a strong combination—a Russian and an Englishman—so strong that we have always fought on different sides hitherto.’

The Russian moistened his lips slowly and painfully with his tongue.

‘Why did you take me?’ he asked plaintively. ‘I was not good enough for you; I was not strong enough. For the last month I have been a burden to you instead of a help. I used to consider myself a strong man; but compared to your strength, to your energy, to your courage, I am as a fly. Ah, Mistley—the time has gone now for the nonsense of master and servant! You guessed my secret when you first offered to take me as guide, but you never guessed my real name. It seems strange, does it not, that the two men whose names are more hateful and more fearful to that . . . *devil* than the name of any other living man, should die side by side in the desert? Stoop low and I will whisper my name, for fear the heavens hear

it. Do not start, for it is a name that curdles the blood of every honest man ; and yet I have been honest. From first to last I have been honest. This is the last, and now, with the hand of Death upon me, I say—there is no God !

‘ Hush, Paul ! You need not tell me your name. I know who you are now.’

‘ It is all very well for you in happy England,’ continued the other, ‘ to say there is a God ; for our country there is none.’

‘ If you do not cease, I will go and leave you,’ said Mistley. To hear the rattle of the man’s breath, as he gathered strength to utter these words, was a terrible experience.

‘ Mistley,’ whispered the dying man after a pause.

‘ Yes, Paul.’

‘ If you live through this, never let them know that I am dead. Let the burden of

my existence weigh on *his* mind. While *he* thinks I am alive, he will never know a moment's peace. Let this be my legacy to the man who made me what I am !

Winyard Mistley crouched on the sand in silence. He had an Englishman's awkward shyness of mentioning the name of God in other sense than exclamatory, and yet he shivered to think that this man was really dying in his arms with blasphemy on his rigid lips.

Suddenly a sense of chilliness assailed him. Mechanically he touched the prostrate man's brow.

‘ Good . . . God . . . he is dead ! ’

Then he rose painfully to his feet. The silence of that great waste of desert was almost unbearable. Five men out of six would have gone mad in those first moments of realization. Winyard Mistley pressed his forehead with his hands, now cold and damp. His stern eyes slowly scanned the horizon—

it was almost dark. In the sky, away to the east, was a shade of pearly-yellow. This was the soft promise of the moon yet below the horizon. Mechanically the solitary man turned towards it. Presently on the hard black line of the horizon there appeared a fan-like glow of shimmering yellow, narrowing into silver rays; then a tiny spark of light ever broadening. With a flood of glory the great globe slowly mounted, till its lower edge parted with the line of distant desert.

The scene was too majestic, too awful, and too lovely for words.

It almost reconciled Mistley to the death which seemed inevitable.

He turned and glanced at the prostrate form of Paul Maritch, with its cold and relentless face turned silently towards the God Whom he denied.

‘If he could have lived a few moments longer to see that, he would not have died

with those words upon his lips,' he murmured vaguely.

Then his thoughts wandered away. A rush of memories came over him, and sapped at his courage as running water saps at a stone pillar.

'If I could only think of something else,' he muttered, pressing his weary temples. 'If I could only see something else than her eyes . . .'

He slowly raised his face, and again scanned the hopeless desert around him.

Suddenly his gaze remained riveted on one spot, to the west of him.

'What is that?' he mumbled stupidly; 'what is that?'

Slowly, like a stricken tree, he collapsed, falling forward on his face, with his arms stretched across the dead body of Paul Maritch.

For an hour he lay thus. At last he recovered consciousness and awoke, as he

had ever done from sleep, with every sense on the alert.

First he stood up and gazed fixedly to the west, along the white track of moonlight which extended to the very edge of the horizon ; then he balanced himself on the dead body of the horse, and so increased his spread of vision. Across the broad line of light cast by the moon on the sand was a tiny silver streak.

‘ Yes, that is the river ! ’ said Mistley. ‘ My luck has not forsaken me, and his bad fortune has followed him to the very end ! ’

Mechanically Winyard Mistley scooped out a shallow grave, and gently laid therein the remains of his desperate companion, before he left the spot.

The peaceful moon looked down that night on the grim desert, and saw one of the finest and wholesomest sights to be seen on earth ; ay, finer and wholesomer than the

fairest woman ever seen. That sight was a brave man fighting doggedly, quietly and wittingly against odds so disproportionate as to render one sceptical regarding all things Providential.





CHAPTER XIV.

THE following season happened to be a gay one, and among the gayest was Lena Wright. She went out with her father and mother ; she went out with her mother's sister—Lady Allron. She went anywhere, with anyone, and appeared to be suffering from an insatiable thirst for change and novelty. No number of dances tired her, no partner wearied her by dancing through from beginning to end.

The good dancers liked her because she danced beautifully, and never confessed to fatigue. She made a serious affair of it, as

they did, and was not bored by silence ; for the accomplished ones talk little when once the music has commenced—the smooth poetic motion, the quick obedience to their slightest signal, is enough for them. The bashful young men were devoted to her, for with them she was girlish and as unsophisticated as themselves. The staid and hopelessly selfish old bachelors admired her, because she laughed readily enough at their egotistical little jokes. And last of all, the matrons did not hate her, because, forsooth, her programme was at the disposal of the new-fledged youth with split gloves as heartily as if each had been the lion of the evening. She set her cap at no one, she was reliable and merry ; and she appeared to like everyone, while in reality she was very near to despising them all with an impartial and large-minded contempt.

Young ladies, however, did not take to her as a rule. They explained vaguely that

they did not understand her, which in the ears of some cynical men amounted to a confession of inferiority. With them she was always sweet and kind, for Lena was of that self-reliant material which (brine it as you may), like mutton, refuses to be salted. She listened with an interested little smile to their vapid boasts of conquests made, of impressions created and hearts sore afflicted, but she never had similar experiences to relate.

There was one among the hard-working pleasure-seekers whom Lena did not despise. Indeed, she did not actually despise any of them ; what she felt was more a sense of pity vaguely tempered with wonder that the clever and undoubtedly brilliant people around her should be content to fritter away their intellects in the unprofitable pursuit of pleasure. This one exception had no individual excuse. He was as frivolous, as objectless, and as lazy as any of them, but

then Charlie, dear old Charlie, was different from other people. He could not be measured satisfactorily by the common standard.

The young sailor's club knew him no longer. His tailor received an order for a remarkably large suit of dress-clothes, of the latest material, constructed upon the newest principles. His huge Saxon frame was to be met with everywhere. It towered over one upon crowded stairs ; it insinuated itself into the tiniest drawing-room, with that wonderful power of contraction which is so soon acquired in a crowded city.

Some weeks had elapsed since Laurance Lowe's dinner-party, and Charlie had not wasted his time. He had reassumed his old position in the Seymour Street household. The circle of visitors there had somewhat changed in his absence, as he soon discovered. This was the natural result of the Colonel's presence. Like all specialists,

the old traveller was much sought after by his kind. Eastern authorities of every age and nationality sought him out, and with these rugged and sunburnt wanderers the Colonel loved to travel again over far-off deserts, comparing notes, asking and receiving hints. Gradually his house came to be recognised as the headquarters of the party designated 'alarmist.' Among these experts it soon became a semi-official secret that Winyard Mistley was 'out there,' and a few were taken into further confidence and allowed to share the Colonel's anxiety at his long silence. As Winyard's brother, Charlie found himself of some importance among these ancient luminaries of Eastern diplomacy. Thus he occupied a double post in the household. Firstly, as the Colonel's friend ; secondly, as Lena's attendant knight wheresoever she might be pleased to go.

Through it all, like an undercurrent, ran the thread of his own diplomatic task. From

Lena he had learnt nothing, but one important step had been made in the right direction. He had renewed his acquaintance with the Baroness de Nantille. She had even been invited to the Wrights' at his suggestion, upon which occasion he had with imperturbable calmness devoted himself to entertaining her, until he discovered that Lena was beginning to notice it. Laurance Lowe had been present on this occasion, as on others when the Baroness and Charlie were thrown together, and very little that passed was lost by him.

There were many drawing-rooms in London to which Mrs. Mistley and her sons had the *entrée*, and where they could be sure of a welcome ; and now Charlie suddenly began to take advantage of this privilege. Wherever Lena went, he was sure to appear during the evening. At dull Geographical and learned soirées he usually put in an appearance—very late, but by no means disturbed,

for it had come to be an understood thing that Lena should accord a smiling *congé* to any bumptious and self-satisfied young explorer who might be by her side when the young sailor appeared.

These same young explorers (a growth of the present generation) afforded a fund of amusement to Lena and her family. They were so terribly prolific in print, and so lamentably dull in society. Their productions were so invariably more to the credit of the British bookbinding industry than to that of literature ; and they were so desperately generous with presentation copies, duly signed with an inky flourish upon the fly-leaf. Such volumes were constantly arriving in Seymour Street, and Lena soon realized the fact that though one may desire to see the author after having read a book, it is rarely satisfactory to read a work upon the strength of having met its author. In fact, she usually experienced a strong disinclination

to cut the pages of a volume of which she had never heard until its writer had forced it under her notice. Unfortunately for the modern tribe of scribbling travellers, the human frame is so constructed that the size of a man's heart must remain a profound secret ; and the ordinary observer is compelled to make his observations upon the basis of the frame itself. Now most of these gentry are, by some humorous freak of Nature, endowed with a diminutive person ; and Lena—a Northumbrian—sweet and tall herself, and accustomed to look up to men, could not succeed in making heroes of these mighty huntsmen (more accustomed to the smell of a proof-sheet than to the glorious odour of burnt powder), and withheld that admiration and respect to which they considered themselves fully entitled.

At balls, Charles Mistley, who was nothing if not methodical, danced three times

with Lena, and took Mrs. Wright down to supper. Then he rescued his mother, and went home to Bedford Place behind a very small cigar, which form of tobacco appears to be much affected by big men, as large pipes are by their smaller brethren.

Of course people talked about his devotion to Lena, adding to it or detracting from it according to the requirements of their purpose, as is the kindly custom of us all. The Colonel saw it, and shrugged his shoulders. Mrs. Wright saw it, and understood it not ; but she watched more closely, and, strange to say, the pleasant friendship existing between her and the young sailor grew in warmth of mutual trust. Laurance Lowe saw it, and grew uneasy.

When anyone spoke to Charles Mistley on the subject, either with the bantering bluntness of a man or the dangerous innocence of a woman, he smiled his good-natured, lazy smile, which might mean much and

usually meant nothing, leaving his questioner more puzzled than before.

If any woman took the trouble of placing Lena in such a position that some remark was absolutely necessary, she would say :

‘ Oh yes, I like him *very* much,’ and then would continue the subject with an unconscious frankness which was vastly puzzling.

To the disinterested observer it would appear that these two young persons were drifting into something more than friendship ; but the observations of that fabulous person are proverbially unreliable.

No one knows better than the writer of these humble lines that a friendship—a perfectly *safe* friendship—cannot exist for long between young people of a different sex who are entirely unconnected by ties of blood. A man can be a true friend to the end of the chapter—to his female cousin. Beyond that the water is of uncertain depth, with shifting shoals and unmarked channels.

Navigation thereon is dangerous—a collision would probably occur, resulting in serious damage to one or both vessels. Or one might run aground, while the other could only tack and wear and drift around, not daring to venture too close for fear of stranding on the same rock.

It would appear, however, that Lena and her large friend knew very well what they were about. At that time she needed some one, and the sailor seemed to slip naturally into the vacant place. They never overstepped the boundaries of friendship, and only once did they come near to so doing.

It came about one evening, and took them both a little by surprise. Lena, who made a point of watching the chaperons dance the Lancers, had no partner; and Charlie, who said he had not enough conversation for 'that trying performance,' came and sat beside her. They secured a pleasant corner, and for some time watched the dancers with-

out speaking. In the set nearest to them was an engaged couple of youthful appearance. These two behaved after the manner of their kind ; meeting, for instance, at the end of the ladies' chain as if the separation had been a matter of weary years.

Lena and her companion naturally observed this couple. Presently Charlie murmured vaguely :

‘ That sort of thing makes me feel inclined to cry.’

Lena laughed gaily.

‘ Please don’t,’ she said with a great show of anxiety. ‘ It might be embarrassing.’

He laughed in his low, quiet way ; and then, suddenly looking grave, he continued to watch the young couple lazily.

‘ I do not feel inclined to cry,’ continued Lena, in a graver tone ; ‘ but I should like to throw something at him—it is so weak and unmanly.’

‘ I suppose we all pass through it . . .’

‘It is to be hoped, for her sake, that he will pass through it pretty soon; and remember that he is a man, with a man’s work to do.’

‘We . . . are severe,’ murmured Charlie innocently.

‘Now confess,’ said Lena, suddenly facing him—‘confess that your feelings are . . . contempt for him, and pity for her.’

‘Yes . . .’ he answered slowly. ‘I suppose you are right—and yet . . .’

‘And yet?’

‘Perhaps I was once like that myself.’

‘Oh no!’ she exclaimed with conviction.

‘Who knows?’ he said quietly.

There was something in the tone of his voice that made her turn to glance at his face. He was carelessly following the delicate tracery of flowers upon his programme with the atrocious pencil attached thereto. He contemplated his handiwork with his head upon one side for some moments, apparently

with much satisfaction; then he looked up, and his calm eyes met hers with a little smile.

‘I am dismal to-night,’ he said. ‘A brute of a sailor-man gave me a strong cigar this afternoon, and strong cigars always make me dismal.’

But Lena failed to smile. She merely sat and looked at him speculatively. Charlie did not appear quite happy under her gentle scrutiny. By way of doing something he leant towards her, and borrowed her fan, which he tried for some time to open the wrong way. While he was still attempting this dangerous feat, he continued :

‘So you must please remember that it is not all natural density—it is partly cigar.’

Like most big men, he rarely smiled, and never frowned, which made it very difficult at times to say whether he spoke seriously or not.

‘I wonder,’ said Lena speculatively . . . ‘I *often* wonder why you so invariably try to misrepresent yourself—especially to me.’

He looked up with a twinkle of genuine amusement in his eyes.

‘You think, I suppose, that it is my duty to make the best of a bad bargain.’

‘Is it a bad bargain?’

He shrugged his shoulders. With the fan he indicated the dancers before them.

‘Give them all little slips of paper and programme pencils,’ he said. ‘Take a ballot—good bargain or bad bargain—and what would the result be?’

She ignored this suggestion, and sat meditating for some moments.

‘There is something,’ she said at length, ‘wanting in your life. You do not look at things in a proper light. I think you want an object—something to be attained, something to try for, even if you fail.’

‘Please,’ interrupted the young sailor,

‘do not look so serious—it is not worth your while.’

‘And,’ she continued with a sudden change of manner, from grave to gay, ‘I know what it is.’

‘By George—do you? I am glad to hear it. Kindly prescribe at once.’

‘What you require,’ she said solemnly, ‘is some one very nice to fall in love with. I cannot think of anyone exactly suitable at the present moment, but . . . I will keep the matter before me.’

‘Is that all?’ he asked in a tone expressive of great disappointment. ‘Your remedy is too simple to be of much use. Also, I have a strong argument against it—sailors should not marry, on principle. They should wait till they are old men, and then marry their housekeepers.’

‘Principles and generalities are to be avoided,’ observed Lena gravely.

‘Well, if you do not approve of that ar-

gument, I can take up another. Suppose that you see in me an interesting young man with a story. Suppose I am a blighted being who has loved in vain, for whom life has no charms, existence no attraction. Suppose there is beneath this immaculate waistcoat a dried-up article which can never love again. . . . How about your object in life then ?

Lena did not reply at once. While watching the dancers, she was slowly opening and closing her fan. When she at length spoke, she deliberately ignored his bantering tone, and said gravely :

‘ I should be very sorry . . . to suppose all that.’

‘ Why ?’

‘ Because I should prefer to continue believing that you are different . . . from the rest.’

With her glance she indicated a group of men idling near the door.

‘It does not pay, in these days, to be different from the rest. Better pass through with the crowd.’

‘And,’ continued Lena, ‘it would not apply to you. If you really wanted a thing, I think you would get it—in an indifferent, lazy way.’

Charles Mistley glanced up into her face, and then, slipping his programme into his waistcoat-pocket, he rose with a sudden access of energy and offered his arm.

‘They have finished,’ he said in a matter-of-fact tone. ‘Let us stroll about and allow some one else to sit down.’





CHAPTER XV.

HAURANCE LOWE and Charles Mistley were not cursed with the conspirator's vice of too much talk and too little action. From the evening when they had first laid their heads together until some weeks afterwards, no word passed between them relative to Lena or Monsieur Jacobi. The subject was by mutual understanding allowed to drop, though it was ever to the fore in either mind.

However, one evening when they were walking home together from what was modestly called a musical soirée, Charlie unearthed the subject. The evening had

been a dull one. Lowe and his young companion had undoubtedly been sorely out of their element, and both knew that their presence at the entertainment was due to the fact that the Wrights had been there. Lena had sung once—beautifully and simply, as was her wont. And the Baroness de Nantille had obliged the assembled multitude three times. Her splendid voice had been greatly assisted by the artistic violin obligato of Monsieur Jacobi.

‘I did not get much farther on to-night,’ said the young sailor, as he stopped beneath a lamp-post to light his cigar.

Lowe, with his hands pushed deep into the pockets of a loose top-coat, and an ancient opera-hat tilted rather forward over his eyes, stopped also, and watched the delicate operation.

‘Couldn’t be expected,’ he said rather indistinctly, by reason of the cigarette between his lips.

‘With Jacobi there, you mean?’

‘Um—m.’

‘Did you observe that he took no notice of any of our party?’

‘Overdid it.’

‘How?’

‘We came in late,’ said Lowe. ‘It was unnatural not to look up.’

They walked on, smoking pensively, and on the deserted pavement their steps rang out like the tread of one foot.

‘I have followed up your hint,’ said Charlie; ‘and I think you are right—Jacobi is mixed up in it somewhere.’

‘Slippery customer,’ muttered Lowe.

‘I have brought all my . . . irresistible . . . powers of fascination to bear upon the Baroness, but somehow I do not get on very rapidly. I cannot understand her—she is extremely changeable. At times she is most gracious, and then suddenly she seems to become distrustful. However, in one of her

gracious moods she may make a mistake, some day, and then . . .’

Lowe took the cigarette from his lips, and after a pause he said :

‘ There is one way of . . . working it.’

‘ Yes?’

‘ Make love to her.’

‘ That is not much in my line of country,’ said the sailor, with rather an awkward laugh.

‘ Don’t think you would find it difficult.’

‘ What do you mean?’ asked Charlie slowly.

‘ She would be quite ready.’

The big sailor blushed—privately, to himself—a dull brick-red beneath the sunburn which he had not yet lost. He was rather fond of underrating himself; but this might after all explain one or two little peculiarities in the Baroness’s manner towards himself. There was almost an apology conveyed in Lowe’s voice when he spoke again.

‘ It’s a beastly task to set a fellow, but . . . cannot do it myself, you know. We’re in it

now ; we must go on, and . . . and Lena is worth it. I turn off here . . . g'night !

Charles Mistley stared vacantly at the receding figure. How well he knew it ! How familiar to him was every little trick of speech, every slow movement, every glance ! There was no variety in Laurance Lowe ; and as the young fellow stood watching the bent head and upright form, a strange sense of monotony came over him. The very words still ringing in his ears were such as the old man had used on a hundred previous occasions : ' I turn off here . . . g'night.' Simply stating the fact, and expressing no suggestion of regret that their ways should separate. Then the quick pressure of his waxen fingers, accompanied by a little forward inclination of the body. It was all so old . . . so desperately familiar. And yet how little . . . how pitifully little . . . did he know of the real man ! The heart beneath that loosely-fitting coat, and the brain under the jaunty

yet pathetic old opera-hat, were alike closed and illegible. Who could say what echoes of a bygone time, what shadows of a former existence flitted through that fallow mind? The forlorn old man, as he walked rapidly through the deserted streets, was a monument to the memory of Love, Hope, and Ambition—dead years ago, and buried.

Charlie was for a moment prompted to run after him, to walk with him, and conduct him safely to his own door, but he hesitated, and it was too late. The lone old fellow did not ask such little attentions; they would have surprised him, and probably he would prefer being left alone.

‘I wonder,’ said the young sailor to himself, as he turned and walked quickly in the opposite direction, ‘I wonder if I will ever come to that!’

Laurance Lowe’s cold-blooded suggestion bore rapid fruit. The following afternoon

Charles Mistley called at the house where the Baroness de Nantille had for the time taken rooms. This was in an unfrequented street leading eastwards from Portland Place. As the young sailor turned the corner into Duke Street, he descried the graceful figure of Monsieur Jacobi at the far end, going in the opposite direction. This caused him to slacken his pace so as to allow the violinist time to get round the corner before he rang the bell of number thirty-seven.

The Baroness was at home. Charles Mistley gave his name, and after a short delay was requested to step upstairs. As he entered the drawing-room, she rose from a seat near the window to greet him, but did not advance a single step.

In deference to her foreign custom, the young Englishman bowed without offering his hand. He noticed that the Baroness was perfectly self-possessed, although very pale. Then he broke the momentary silence

without displaying the least sign of embarrassment or hesitation :

‘ Miss Wright is not here ? ’ he said quietly.

‘ No.’

‘ But this is her day, is it not, madame ? ’

‘ No ; she comes to me to-morrow.’

‘ Ah—I have deranged you for nothing, then. I thought I would find Miss Wright here. I wished to tell her that I have received seats for a theatre to-night . . . ’

He made a movement as if he would go, then he appeared to change his mind.

‘ I have never had an opportunity, madame,’ he said, ‘ of expressing my sympathy. Since I had the pleasure of meeting you last year, you have had a great misfortune, I believe.’

The Baroness bowed her beautiful head and resumed her seat with a peculiar smoothness of action, motioning her visitor to sit down at the same time.

‘You are very kind,’ she said in a low voice, expressive of greater emotion than the occasion would seem to demand. ‘I have passed through certain misfortunes . . . too long to narrate even to such a patient listener as yourself.’

Charlie had not accepted her invitation to seat himself. Instead of so doing he advanced towards the window, and was leaning against the woodwork, looking down at her.

‘I was not aware,’ he said, ‘until just lately that you had the misfortune to be a Russian subject. Anyone of that nationality is interesting to me, as you are perhaps aware. My father was connected with Russia for many years, and now my brother . . . has followed in his footsteps.’

Lower and lower the fair head was bent over the motionless hands, which lay upon her simple dress with a peculiar stillness ; but the Baroness made no reply.

‘ But I do not wish to awaken disagreeable memories, madame ; all I desire is to express my sympathy and my readiness to be of any service to you. It is the least an Englishman can do in his own country, which is not exactly renowned for its sympathy towards strangers.’

The Baroness raised her head, but she did not look at him. She appeared to be studying the pattern of the dingy lace curtain. Her companion saw her eyelids quiver for a moment—then she spoke in her smooth monotone.

‘ Do not call me—“ madame,” ’ she said. ‘ I am not . . . madame. I took my mother’s title for the sake of convenience, in London.’

Ah, Mother Eve ! How many neat little plots hast thou demolished ! How often hast thou, by the sudden raising of thy restless tongue, upset the completest schemes ever woven by human brain !

Charles Mistley looked down at her with-

out betraying the least sign of surprise ; but he changed colour slightly.

‘That only makes your claim upon my services the stronger,’ he said, after a pause.

The Baroness bowed her head silently, and said :

‘Monsieur, I have no claim upon your services. On the contrary, you are the last Englishman to whom I should apply in case I required assistance !’

‘I do not understand . . .’

‘You will do so, however, when I tell you that my real name is Marie Bakovitch.’

‘Marie . . . Bakovitch !’ repeated the Englishman slowly—‘Marie . . . Bakovitch !’

She raised her cold blue eyes to his, watching keenly the effect of the revelation she had just made.

‘Then,’ she said, ‘your brother has told you ?’

‘No—Colonel Wright told me.’

‘And now do you understand why I can claim no disinterested service from you?’

‘No,’ he said simply.

She laughed, a little short laugh that would have been harsh had her voice not been wonderfully melodious.

‘You Englishmen—are so aggravatingly chivalrous,’ she said. ‘With us it is different—women are nearer to the men in Russia.’

‘I do not understand, mademoiselle,’ said the young sailor gravely, ‘why you have told me this.’

‘No?’ She raised her eyes to his again. He would have been blind had he not understood what he read there. ‘It is a long story,’ she continued, ‘and . . . perhaps an old one. Also, it is not cheerful, for it is the story of a mistake.’

‘Tell it to me,’ he said quietly.

‘Eighteen months ago, immediately after your brother left England, I had a long and serious illness. Through it I was nursed by

my maid—a child of sixteen, assisted by my . . . friend, Ivan Meyer. When I recovered sufficiently to take an interest in life I learnt from him that he was impatiently awaiting the moment when he could leave me to return to Russia. There had been in my native town a reign of terror, and among the first to be arrested on suspicion was my father—a noted loyalist, a faithful Government servant. It is thus . . . monsieur . . . that Nihilists are made.’

‘Then,’ said the Englishman, ‘you have changed.’

‘Yes, I have changed.’

‘I am sorry for it.’

‘Why?’

‘Because,’ said Charlie, ‘it brings you into contact with such men as Monsieur Jacobi.’

Marie Bakovitch looked up sharply, but he avoided meeting her eyes.

‘What do you know of Monsieur Jacobi?’

Charlie shrugged his broad shoulders contemptuously.

‘Nothing, mademoiselle.’

‘But you *hate* him.’

‘Well . . . scarcely. I have never had the necessary energy to hate anyone yet. I do not like him.’

‘It is of Jacobi,’ continued the girl, ‘that I have to tell; it is against him that I must ask your help. Remember I do not ask it for myself, for I do not fear him. It is for Lena Wright . . .’

Marie Bakovitch looked up somewhat suddenly. She met her companion’s eyes, calm, impassive, and inscrutable as usual, fixed upon her face.

‘Yes,’ he said; ‘go on.’

‘He is connected with several secret societies, political and otherwise. Notably the “Brotherhood of Liberty,” of which he pretends to be the London chief. For some months he has been scheming to obtain

money from Lena Wright for the purposes of the Brotherhood.'

'I thought money would come in some where.'

'Yes, all Jacobi's plots are connected with money sooner or later. He heard from sources unknown to me that she will be comparatively rich some day, and he has been endeavouring to persuade her to borrow this money ; it is a large sum.'

'You have not told me what hold he has over her.'

'He has represented that the Brotherhood has agencies and connections all over the world, and by these means he could, with the aid of a certain sum of ready money, obtain immediate information as to the safety, or otherwise, of your . . . brother Winyard. She . . . I think . . . she . . .'

'Yes,' said Charlie gravely, 'I understand . . . But how did he get to know of this ? . . . he has surely had no opportunity . . .'

‘He learnt it from me.’

‘From you? You said just now that you did not fear him.’

‘Not now. He can do nothing now—now that I . . . that you . . .’

‘Ah!’ said the Englishman compassionately, ‘I understand. He has been threatening you with the disclosure of your real name. You need not have feared that, mademoiselle. No one except my brother could have harmed you, and you have misjudged him if you thought that he would do anything unmanly or . . . cowardly!’

She sat before him on a low chair. Her face was hidden from him, and as he looked down upon her he could only see the soft coils of flaxen hair and the white curve of her neck. But he heard the long-drawn, sobbing breath; he saw the quick rise of her shoulders. Assuredly he read these signs aright. No man with a tithe of Charles Mistley’s intelligence could have

been so blind, so cruelly blind, unless the blindness were intentional.

‘It was not that, monsieur,’ she murmured, in little more than a whisper.

He stood there motionless and strong as ever man was created, but there passed across his face a momentary twinge of real physical pain. Suddenly he roused himself with an effort, and said with a practical matter-of-fact energy :

‘Mademoiselle, we must waste no time. I am deeply grateful—more grateful than ever I can hope to express—for the confidence you have placed in me. You said just now that . . . Jacobi pretends to be the London chief of this Brotherhood ; have you doubts about the truth of his assertion ?’

‘Yes ; I know that such a Society exists, and that its headquarters are in Rotterdam ; but I believe Jacobi is no member of it. He has represented himself to be its chief,

simply for the purpose of obtaining money. He has, in fact, deceived us all.'

'Thank you! May I ask when you next assemble?'

'To-morrow afternoon in this room, and Miss Wright is to be present as a probationary member—three o'clock is the hour.'

'To-morrow at three. Thank you! You may leave everything to me, mademoiselle. I have a friend—Laurance Lowe—who is a journalist of some repute. He will doubtless know about this "Brotherhood of Liberty"—the real one, I mean. I will endeavour to do everything in as quiet and . . . seamanlike . . . a manner as I can. I will see you to-morrow afternoon.'

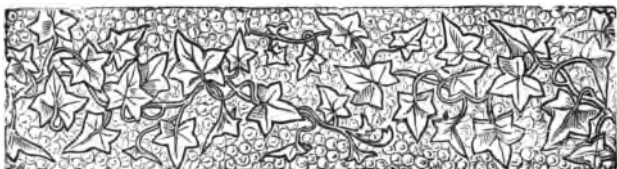
With a bow he left her, walking slowly as though allowing her time to call him back if she had so desired. But she remained motionless, and did not even return his formal salutation.

Through the open window came the sound

of his firm footstep on the pavement below, dying away in the perspective of sound that travelled over the grimy roofs in one continuous roar of life from Oxford Street, and the neighbouring busy haunts of men.

The dull smoky twilight came on apace. The red glow faded into purple, and imperceptibly assumed a neutral gray at last. Still Marie Bakovitch sat there with bowed head and lifeless eyes. No murmur of complaint passed her level lips, no sigh rose within her bosom. She merely sat there without appearing to think or reason—sat and endured with that strange, pathetic, *dumb* endurance which is the curse of the Slavonic race.





CHAPTER XVI.

LENA'S singing-lesson the following afternoon was interrupted by the arrival of Monsieur Jacobi. This gentleman was accompanied by his friend Mr. Ryan, a keen-eyed individual, who was ever ready to espouse the cause of the oppressed of every nationality, provided there was money to be made and little risk attaching. Presently a feeble-minded English lady of uncertain age arrived, and immediately behind her a mild-mannered German gentleman of short sight and unkempt hair.

This was the first time Lena had met the members of the Brotherhood of Liberty, and

she was divided between an inclination to laugh and a desire to run away. But everybody was desperately serious. Monsieur Jacobi was suave and gentlemanly as usual, but not entirely at his ease. His hold over the Baroness de Nantille, as she was still called, had never been very secure, and he instinctively felt that it was slipping from him day by day. However, the man was possessed of a certain superficial courage—a type of bravery which shines in the presence of women, but goes no distance among men.

There was just enough mystery in the proceedings to content the English maiden lady and the short-sighted Teuton, without unnecessarily aggravating the Baroness. When all were seated, not at a table, but round the room, without formality, Monsieur Jacobi began speaking :

‘ I have considered it necessary,’ he said, ‘ to call the London branch of this Brotherhood together, for the purpose of deciding a

question of some importance. It is usual for myself and Secretary Ryan to decide such minor questions as may arise, but we feel that this is beyond our jurisdiction.

Here Monsieur Jacobi paused, and assumed a demeanour expressive of some hesitation in the choice of words necessary to proceed with a somewhat difficult task. The German gentleman took the opportunity of ejaculating 'Goot !' which monosyllable was allowed to pass unnoticed. The English lady gazed admiringly with the weakest of eyes at the speaker, and rubbed her yellow hands nervously together. Secretary Ryan lay back in his chair, looking intensely business-like and practical. Lena began to feel that she was in what Charlie would call a 'mess ;' but, like her mother, she was endowed with a certain amount of pluck, and she waited patiently, glancing occasionally at the Baroness's scornful face.

' I need not tell you,' continued Monsieur

Jacobi, with some emotion, ‘that our movements are again hampered by the poverty of the Brotherhood. It is the old sad story. The rich oppress us by their very riches. Against this demon we fight in vain. And yet who can say that it is in vain? Is it for nothing that we work? Is it for nothing that those of us who possess certain means give what we have to the cause?’

‘Goot!’ observed the German, who was penniless.

‘No; let us go on with our work, and hope that in the fulness of time—perhaps when none of us are left to witness it—the fruit may grow and ripen. It is enough for us to know that while assisting our poorer brethren, we are sowing the glorious seeds of liberty.’

‘Hear, hear!’ said Secretary Ryan. He always said ‘hear, hear,’ after the word ‘liberty.’

‘And now—*now* at the moment when we

are almost paralyzed by the want of funds, one among us has come forward willingly and nobly with open hands. My friends, are we to accept this generous gift? It is to answer this question that I have called you together. I do not desire to bias you in either direction. Heaven knows we want the money badly ; we all know to what good use it will be put. But are we to lose sight of the fact that it must necessarily be obtained with some secrecy ? Are we to overlook the possibility of misunderstanding, of misconception, that will hang over our own heads ? My friends . . . I will say no more ; my opinion must not be permitted to influence your decision.'

'No, no,' cried Ryan ; 'let us have your opinion.'

Monsieur Jacobi hesitated for some time. He even succeeded in looking bashful. Lena glanced at the Baroness, and saw that her eyes were fixed on the door.

‘ Well . . . ’ began Jacobi. ‘ If it is your wish I will speak. Now—listen to me——’

At this moment the door opened, and Charles Mistley entered the room, alone. In one comprehensive glance he took in the situation, noting the position of every person in the room. He closed the door, and stood with his back against it.

‘ No,’ he said imperturbably. ‘ Listen to me !’

Jacobi half rose from his seat, and then sank back again with rather a sickly smile. Ryan made no movement whatever, but his unhealthy face assumed an ashen-gray. The maiden lady and the German sat gazing weakly at the stalwart intruder. Noiselessly the Baroness rose from her seat, and crossed the room to where Lena sat ; and there she stood, waiting.

Lena felt that the whole situation was intensely funny from an observer’s point of view ; but unfortunately she was an actor in

the comedy, which sadly altered the matter. However, Charles Mistley had too much tact to treat the affair jocosely. He looked gravely round him, and then spoke in a deliberately authoritative voice, which recalled to Lena's memory a half-forgotten remark of Laurance Lowe's, to the effect that Charlie was essentially a foul-weather sailor.

'I am sorry,' he said, 'to disturb matters, but . . . I think Monsieur Jacobi knows who I am. If he should require any explanation he knows where to find me . . .'

Jacobi shrugged his shoulders indifferently, while Ryan watched him furtively.

'Will you come with me now?' continued Mistley, addressing Lena.

There was a sad lack of dramatic effect about the whole affair. No one jumped to his feet and drew a firearm from his breast-pocket. There was no need for the sailor to assume a defiant attitude, and hurl back his

assailants. In fact, the proceedings were decidedly tame. Charles Mistley not only succeeded in performing his task quietly and in a seamanlike manner, as he had promised, but went farther, and rendered the whole affair a lamentably dull incident. This is to be regretted ; the loss, great though it may be to the world in general, is essentially one affecting the chronicler of these events. So much might have been made of it. What pictures might have been drawn of the huge mariner, barricaded by such movable pieces of furniture as he could lay hands on, standing in front of the trembling Lena, brandishing a chair over the muddled head of the short-sighted German ! Bullets might have been made to bury themselves in the wood-work of the door, and . . . ah ! glorious inspiration—Marie Bakovitch might effectively have been removed from the scene by the simple means of a revolver-bullet aimed at Charles Mistley's heart, but intercepted by

her fair breast ! The whole thing would have illustrated so well—what a chance for the artist commissioned with the design for a yellow-back !

The thought is a sad one ; but Truth trims her lamp so well that the poorest writer must perforce keep to the path. The lives of most of us would not, it is to be feared, illustrate very well. Many of us would find it hard to provide a suitable and attractive incident for the cover. And, again, few of us are called upon to assist at the sudden demise of such persons as are hateful to us, or in our way, at the precise moment when such an event would wind up the second volume satisfactorily.

Nothing of a dramatic nature occurred. Lena rose from her seat, and crossing the room, she stood beside Charlie, experiencing a sudden sense of comfort and relief at the mere contact of his sleeve, which touched her shoulder.

‘I do not know,’ said Charlie to the assembled Brotherhood, ‘and it is not my business to inquire, who is implicated in this swindle, and who among you are dupes ; but it may be of some interest to you to learn that that man . . . there . . . Jacobi—is a common swindler. He is no more the London chief of the Brotherhood of Liberty than I am. Such a society exists, and I have been in communication with the authorities at its headquarters in Rotterdam. It has transpired that Jacobi was once a clerk in their office ; and they are at present somewhat anxious for his address, with a view to the recovery of some funds which he, by mistake, removed from their cash-box, and omitted to restore. It is only fair to you, Monsieur Jacobi, to inform you that in the course of my inquiries I am afraid the Brotherhood must have learnt that you are in London.’

Then he opened the door, and by way of

intimating to Lena to pass out in front of him, he touched her arm slightly. It was not his habit to do this, as it is with some men. Not even with his mother did he ever indulge in such harmless familiarities. Lena noted the little touch, and somehow, to her, it said much that Charlie never allowed to appear in his intercourse with her. There was a sense of protection, a hint, as it were, of brotherly affection and reliability in this rare exhibition of feeling, slight though the indication of it might be.

At the head of the stairs he stopped.

‘You will find Mr. Lowe downstairs,’ he said. ‘I must go back and see after the Baroness. Walk on slowly towards Bedford Place ; I will catch you up. My mother expects us all to afternoon tea, as arranged yesterday.’

He watched her descend the stairs, and heard Lawrance Lowe come forward to meet her ; then he turned, and coolly re-entered

the room where the so-called Brotherhood was still assembled.

With a vague feeling of unreality Lena passed out of the house with Laurance Lowe. Mechanically she noticed a sturdy, sailor-like man walking slowly past the house. This son of the Deep assumed such an exceedingly innocent air of exaggerated non-recognition at the sight of Laurance Lowe, that had Lena had her usual keenness of observation at command, she could not have failed to detect that he was connected with Charlie's seamanlike manoeuvre.

Lowe said nothing for some minutes. He walked slowly by the girl's side in unemotional silence. Before they had gone many yards Lena stopped short.

'Has Charlie gone back,' she said, with sudden realization of it all, 'into . . . that room alone?'

'Yes,' replied Lowe. 'He will catch us up presently.'

She made a little movement as if to retrace her footsteps.

‘But . . . but,’ she exclaimed, ‘we cannot let him do that! There are three men . . .’

‘It is all right,’ said Lowe, walking on; ‘Charlie knows the sort of men he has to deal with.’

Nevertheless, he glanced back at the corner of the street to see if Charlie had come out of the house yet.

They walked on together. There were a hundred questions Lena wished to ask, but she was restrained by a feeling of humiliation or shyness. Lowe appeared to be in no hurry to explain matters. To judge from his manner, it would appear that Lena had just come from her singing-lesson. This method of slurring over difficulties by silence is a terribly fascinating one, mistaken though it may be. It grows upon us as it had grown upon Laurance Lowe; and, like any

other habit, the tendrils it throws out over the mind are stronger than we believe.

Before they had gone far they heard a quick footstep behind them, and Charles Mistley came to Lena's side. They were in Portland Place, and as he joined them he beckoned to the driver of a hansom-cab. There seemed to be no question of Lowe getting into the cab with Lena. He nodded, and as he beckoned to a second driver, Charlie took his seat at Lena's side.

The young sailor began his explanation at once.

'Lena,' he said, 'only Lowe and myself know of this, and it will be better to keep the whole affair quiet for some time yet. Of course, it is not quite the right thing for you to keep it secret from your mother; but later . . . later, perhaps . . . when Win is home again, you can tell her all about it.'

Lena turned slowly towards him. She was leaning back in the cab, while he sat

forward with his gloved hands resting on the door. They were passing down Oxford Street, and the smoothness of the pavement rendered it unnecessary for her to raise her voice.

‘When Win comes home!’ she repeated wonderingly. ‘What has Win to do with it?’

She was fully convinced that whatever he might know, he could not have guessed at her motive for joining the Brotherhood of Liberty. *That*, at all events, was never to be disclosed. But Charles Mistley had provided for this.

‘The Baroness de Nantille,’ he said, ‘is Marie Bakovitch!’

She seemed to be slowly forcing the realization of his words into her own mind. At the first thought it appeared to be an impossibility; but gradually, as she looked back over her acquaintanceship with the Baroness, the thing seemed possible, and

finally she felt that there was no doubt about the truth of her companion's statement.

After a short pause Charlie continued :

‘I have acted in the matter as I think Win himself would have done. Of course, I do not pretend to know much of these diplomatic affairs, but . . . it seems to me, Lena . . . that nothing must be disclosed, even to the Colonel, just yet. By chance I learnt about Jacobi from the Baroness herself—some day I will tell you all about it. It is a long story to begin now. When I went back just now, she told me that Ivan Meyer, the man to whom she is . . . engaged—is coming to-morrow. She will write a note to you to-night, saying that she is leaving London suddenly, and cannot give you any more singing-lessons.

Then they drove on for some time without speaking. Presently Lena began to realize that all the events of the last half-hour

were the result of forethought and deliberate organization. Every little mishap had been provided for, every moment had been utilized, and every action premeditated by the good-natured lazy sailor, who invariably maintained that he was the poorest organizer living.

She saw it all, and yet she could not begin to thank him. At last she spoke.

‘How stupid I have been!’ she said.
‘How idiotic and weak you must think me, Charlie!’

‘No,’ he replied. ‘No . . . I think . . . well, it does not matter much what I think, because here we are in Bedford Place; and there is my respected mother at the window. It was arranged that I should bring you here from your singing-lesson—if you remember.’





CHAPTER XVII.

HARLES MISTLEY never gave Lena the full account of his discovery of Jacobi's little plot. It is so easy to put off an explanation till a more convenient occasion, which somehow never arises. From Lowe she could learn nothing—explanation was not his forte.

And so the subject was shelved, partly with deliberate intention on the part of the young sailor, partly by the advent of a more momentous question. Jacobi disappeared, and never returned into Lena's life to wake up memories best left to sleep. Marie Bakovitch left England with Ivan Meyer.

Some years later Mrs. Mistley heard of her in Paris, recognising the beautiful Russian girl in a vivacious French description of the 'ravishing' wife of a rising young artist. It would have been easy enough for the gay little Englishwoman to have made the acquaintance of the blond belle of a Paris season had she desired to do so ; but women are more charitably inclined towards each other than the world is generally pleased to suppose, and the mother of Winyard and Charles Mistley felt that it was better to avoid recalling to the mind of Madame Ivan Meyer the fact that she had once been called Marie Bakovitch.

On the day completing the eighteenth month after Winyard Mistley's departure there was a dinner-party at the house in Seymour Street. Any disinterested and experienced matron, watching the arrival of the guests from between the lathes of a venetian blind, would unhesitatingly have

prophesied a slow and wearisome evening for the guests at this entertainment. There were no ladies—‘absolutely no ladies, my dear’—except Mrs. Mistley, Lena, and her mother.

The only young man was Charles Mistley, and he was handicapped by the presence of half a dozen veterans—white-haired old warriors, who were desperately attentive and vastly gallant to the ladies, more especially to Lena; sturdy old rolling-stones, with an inexhaustible fund of anecdotes, little calculated to entertain the fair. These old stagers, however, did weighty justice to the delicacies set before them, and were mightily pleased with the manner in which they each and severally entertained the ladies.

Mrs. Wright led the way to the drawing room at the first opportunity, and the old fellows were left to pull down their waistcoats with a grave sense of satisfaction at

the skilful manner in which they had kept up the spirits of the assembly.

It was rather a remarkable fact that, considering the previous hilarity, no sound of mirth travelled from the dining-room to the drawing-room in the lengthy interval that supervened before the gentlemen rose from the table.

When they at length trooped into the drawing-room, they found the two elder ladies sitting together near the fireplace, while Lena stood in the narrow window, taking advantage of the last rays of daylight to complete some dainty piece of needlework. Charles Mistley lounged across the room, and occupied in a masterly manner the remainder of that window.

‘Spoiling your eyes?’ he inquired indifferently.

‘Yes,’ she replied.

The old men grouped themselves round the two elder ladies, and conversation was

the immediate result. These two women of the world knew how to 'take' their ancient admirers. They knew the style of conversation that interested them; they laughed readily at somewhat feeble old jokes. Thus these veteran actors acted to each other, knowing all the time that it could be but in vain. Mrs. Mistley knew that these travellers had been called together to discuss the probable fate of her son. The old men surely knew something of a parent's love; they must have known that this smiling gray-haired woman was bearing with her such a weight of cruel suspense as only a woman could carry without sinking beneath the burden. And yet, forsooth, they talked of the 'season,' of Parliamentary reputations made and lost, and other matters of equal importance; throwing in their little jokes and helping each other cunningly with a ready chorus of meaningless laughter.

The fading light of the sunset was fully

reflected on Lena's face as she stood in the recess of the tall window working deftly. Charlie, leaning against the wall opposite to her, was looking at her absently. One would hardly have thought that he was noting the little painful droop of her eyelids when she ceased speaking. He had not the reputation of a keen observer.

His reflections were interrupted by the advent of Adonis, who solemnly crossed the room, at this moment, to pay his respects. He stooped and caressed the dog's rough head for some moments ; then, without raising his eyes, he said : ' Lena.'

' Yes.'

The girl looked up from her work with her ready smile, which had of late grown almost mechanical.

' At last—at *last* I am going to do something.'

' To do something,' she repeated with ready interest.

‘Yes. I have made a mighty resolution to be a hammer in future instead of an anvil.’

‘I am very glad,’ she said in a more serious tone, though still treating the matter lightly. ‘It is to be hoped that it will prove beneficial to humanity.’

‘Do you know,’ he said with sudden gravity, ‘that you are looking desperately ill?’

She raised her eyes to his with a little defiant stare of surprise.

‘Are you going to study medicine?’ she asked, returning to her needlework.

He made no pretence of smiling, and continued quietly :

‘You have a look about the eyes which, by some mysterious method, conveys to my slow brain the impression that you dread waking up in the morning, and . . . consequently wake up all the earlier.’

She turned suddenly, and placing both her hands on the woodwork of the window,

she looked, between her wrists, into the quiet street. Her profile, pure and almost painfully refined in its beauty, was all he could see. The movement brought her closer to him, and once she swayed a little to one side so that her dress touched his sleeve. He looked down at her gently, noting the slim straightness of her figure, the firm curve of her lips. She was very strong in her self-suppression; but compared to his, her strength was as nothing.

‘This atmosphere of suspense is killing you,’ he continued in his monotonous voice. ‘It is all very well for these old folks—they can stand it. Perhaps their senses are a little duller than ours; but for us it is desperately trying. I have felt it for some time . . . and . . . and I have watched its effect upon you. It shows more than you quite realize, I think. I am not a particularly sensitive fellow, or nervous, you know; and if I feel it, it must be pretty bad.’

‘You make me feel quite interesting,’ she said, with a brave little laugh, which, however, ceased abruptly, and she closed her lips hurriedly.

He continued to look down at her gravely for some moments; then he turned, and glanced out of the window indifferently.

‘Your left hand is trembling at the present moment,’ he said in a lower tone. ‘It may be—of course—that it is resting on the nerve; but your mother is looking this way . . . also mine.’

She let her hand drop, almost impatiently, to her side. Presently she resumed her work, and took no notice of him for some moments.

‘What has all this to do with your virtuous resolutions?’ she asked slowly and almost coldly.

‘To-day is Tuesday,’ he replied; ‘on Friday I start for Central Asia. I am going to seek Win.’

She grew very pale ; the colour even left her lips. Charlie continued to gaze out of the window. They both looked remarkably bored.

‘ But he said that no one had to be sent before twenty-one months—twelve weeks yet.’

‘ Central Asia,’ replied Charlie, ‘ does not belong to Win. I can go there if I want to ; I will risk disobeying his instructions. The old gentlemen, were rather difficult to deal with on that subject ; but I succeeded at last in convincing them that it was best for me to go. I have arranged about my leave of absence.’

‘ Then,’ said she decisively, ‘ you think there is something wrong.’

‘ Yes—Lena. I am afraid there is something wrong.’

She was still working at the little silken trifle, through which the needle slipped at regular intervals.

‘Tell me . . .’ she whispered, ‘what you are afraid of . . . what you think has happened. Tell me if you have given up all . . . hope!’

‘No, there is no question of giving up yet; there is every hope, every chance in his favour. Win is very tough; we are a tough race. I think he may have been delayed by a hundred mishaps, at which it is impossible to guess. When I am gone, Lena, it will be your task to . . . to keep my mother up to the mark. It is so much easier to be plucky when there are plucky people around one.’

‘I will try, Charlie,’ she said simply.

‘And I will keep you posted up as to my whereabouts. If I miss him—if we pass each other on the way, you should be able to stop me somewhere; the Colonel is arranging all that. But—after all, if I wander about there, say, for a year or so, it does not matter much. A year more or

less out of an idle life is of no great consequence.'

He stopped, and looked down at her with his lazy, placid smile. Presently she looked up, and met his eyes.

'Yours is not an idle life, Charlie,' she said. 'I have realized that lately. I will never call you lazy again. It is only your manner.'

'By-the-bye,' he said suddenly, as if recollecting himself, 'I will leave this cross with you. It is the thing Akryl bought from Win at Kizil Arvat. It is no good my taking it out there again. I will fasten it to your watch-chain. Allow me—no one is looking. It is all right !'

He made a movement as if to join the others. It was a silent suggestion that she should do the same; but she remained motionless, and for some reason he did not carry out his purpose.

'Charlie,' she said, looking past him into

the deserted street, 'do you remember one night long ago . . . it was the first time that we danced so much together—the first time we found out . . . how well we . . . got on with each other?'

'Yes,' he replied with a peculiar, dull look upon his face. 'Yes, I remember.'

'You look now just as you looked then,' she continued vaguely. 'There is no change in your appearance; you are as big and strong and . . . and *reliable* as ever. Your manner is apparently the same. But there is a change somewhere—there is a change in you or in me. What is it—where is it—how is it, Charlie? Is it in you, or is it in me?'

'I expect,' he suggested restlessly, 'that it is in both. We are getting older, you see. People cannot grow older without changing a little, and it is generally supposed to be a change for the better.'

'But—but this is not for the better.'

‘I believe,’ he said lightly, ‘that the whole thing is a creation of your own imagination. You admit that I am the same ; I know that you are unaltered—where can the change be ?’

‘Yet—you must admit that there is a difference. Things are not as they used to be.’

‘It is the way of the world,’ he replied with a mirthless laugh. ‘Things never are as they used to be. No—Lena, I admit nothing. There is an old gentleman opening the piano preparatory to asking you to sing. I must go and help him.’

‘I am *not* going to sing the “Farewell” to-night,’ she said, as he moved away.

‘No,’ he replied gravely. ‘Please don’t !’





CHAPTER XVIII.

SO Charles Mistley tranquilly began his simple arrangements for a journey he was destined never to take.

Suspense, like all mortal things, must have an end ; and for the watchers in Seymour Street the end was drawing near. It came at last, on the Thursday morning, just twenty-four hours before the time fixed by Charlie for his departure.

Lena was still in her room, although the punctual breakfast-bell had been rung some minutes before. She was in the act of fixing a little brooch at her throat, when

there was a hurried knock at the door, and the sound of the Colonel's voice, vibrating with emotion, followed instantaneously.

‘Lena—Lena!’

‘Yes, papa,’ she answered quietly enough. Then she stood motionless with her back to the window, watching the door.

‘May I come in, Lena?’

‘Yes!’ She knew that there was news at last.

Then the door opened. For a moment Lena experienced a strong desire to laugh aloud. The Colonel entered the room hastily; in one hand he flourished a Submarine Telegraph form, in the other was the bread-knife with little scraps of brown paper adhering to its edge.

‘Mistley is at Vienna!’ he gasped. ‘He is at Vienna! Thank God for this!’

He threw the bread-knife upon the bed, and presently went there and rashly sat upon it.

‘Yes,’ said Lena quietly. She was still engaged with her brooch, and now she turned to look into the glass.

‘Lena,’ exclaimed her father, ‘do you hear me—do you understand? He is at Vienna—he is safe! Here is the telegram—they have just brought it!’

He held the paper towards her. She saw the action, and noted mechanically the slips of blue paper pasted on to the white telegram form. She remembered wishing with all her strength to step forward and take that paper; then there came a sudden blank—a sense of utter, boundless vacuity, and she found her mother’s comforting arms around her.

At breakfast the telegram was discussed word by word. It was not entirely satisfactory upon closer investigation.

‘Safe, but quite knocked up. Can you come to me? Tell mater and Charlie.’

“ ‘ ‘ Can you come to me ? ’ . . . ’ repeated Colonel Wright, with a fierce look in his eyes, as he swallowed a hasty breakfast. ‘ Can I go to him ? that is like Mistley. As if the fellow did not know . . . as if he didn’t know. And yet he puts it like that ; it is Mistley all through. You cannot tell whether the fellow means to be funny or pathetic, and somehow it is both.’

Mrs. Wright made no reply. She merely laughed a low gentle laugh, and behind the friendly covert of a large fern, which stood upon the table, a tear fell unseen upon a piece of fried bacon.

Presently Lena drove off to Bedford Place with the news. The morning was fresh and invigorating, with just a suspicion of autumnal sharpness in the clear atmosphere. Never had London appeared so fair to Lena—never had the world appeared so bright. The very drudges dusting the steps and black-leading the scrapers were

not ordinary housemaids that morning. For them, even, life seemed to have its pleasures, its joys and its consolation. The dust they caused to fly from overworked door-mats actually scintillated with gold.

The patient hansom-cab horse, with his flopping, nerveless ears, was worthy of all human sympathy—the very ordinary hansom flew through the rosy air with the speed of the sun-god's chariot.

Mrs. Mistley was standing with her back to the window, the *Times* in her hand, when Lena entered the room. The remains of breakfast upon the table showed that Charlie had already left the house. Mrs. Mistley turned her graceful white head somewhat sharply towards the door, when the servant opened it. For a moment she looked at Lena with a sudden gleam of emotion in her calm gray eyes; then she laid aside the newspaper and advanced towards her.

‘You have news!’ she said, in her pretty

tainted English. 'Lena, you have news; I can see it in your eyes!'

Lena had to stoop just a little to kiss the brave steady lips.

'Yes,' she replied, 'I have news. Papa has sent me to say that Winyard is all right. He is in Vienna—here is a copy of the telegram.'

Mrs. Mistley received the news cheerfully. She evinced no surprise, and was by no means demonstrative in her joy; in fact, it was hard to realize that she had ever felt a moment's anxiety. Lena expressed some surprise that Winyard should have telegraphed to her father instead of his own mother; but Mrs. Mistley thought nothing of it, explaining that Win knew her wandering ways.

'Charlie is out,' she added, 'buying a saddle or something. He has also gone to see the doctor to show his arm, which is as strong as the other now. I will leave a

note for him, in case he should come in when I am out.'

An hour after the receipt of Winyard's telegram, Colonel Wright was at Charing Cross Station. Shortly before the departure of his train, Mrs. Mistley and Lena arrived, accompanied by Adonis, who had now quite assumed the repose of manner characterizing a town dog.

It was arranged that if Winyard was seriously ill he should be taken to Seymour Street, which was quieter and more convenient for an invalid than Bedford Place. After a few days' rest the move to Broomhaugh could easily be accomplished.

All this was rapidly settled, and there were still three or four minutes to spare. They proceeded to walk up and down the broad platform somewhat restlessly amid the restless throng. To Colonel Wright this comfortable journey was nothing; he had secured a good seat, and there was no crowd,

yet he was not at his ease. He felt compelled to break the silence, which was, in reality, by no means irksome to the ladies.

‘There are,’ he hazarded, ‘many different sorts of courage. There is that of the soldier, which is emotional and strongly dependent on emulation; there is that of the sailor, which is perhaps of a higher order, though it is purely defensive; he repels danger and fights for his life. But highest of all there is the courage that needs no emulation, asks for none to share its dangers, faces solitude and continuous risk with steady intrepidity—surely this is the noblest courage . . .’

They turned and walked towards the engine again, Adonis meekly following with his left ear slightly elevated and his face expressive of dignified attention, for he loved the sound of the Colonel’s voice.

‘And,’ continued the old soldier, with a glance downwards at the silent women on

either side of him, both trim and straight and gracious, though one head was clad in soft, dry white hair—‘And there is the wonderful courage of women who stay behind and wait . . . but that is different. I think . . . it comes to them direct from heaven.’

When Charles Mistley called at Seymour Street later in the morning, he was told that Colonel Wright had suddenly left home, but that the ladies were in.

The first person he saw on entering the room was his mother comfortably established with some needlework in her hands, as if she were one of the family. Some women have this pleasant way with them, knowing how to settle into any household—be it in joy or be it in sorrow—in a few minutes.

Mrs. Wright and Lena were standing near the window studying Bradshaw’s ‘Railway Guide.’

As soon as Mrs. Mistley caught sight of

her son she rose, and advancing towards him, took his hand, apparently forgetting that she had seen him only a few hours before. The action placed her rather cleverly between him and the two ladies, so that they could not well see his face.

‘Charlie,’ she said quickly, ‘we have news of Win. I left a note for you at Bedford Place. The Colonel has gone to Vienna to bring him home, as he is knocked up.’

The young sailor nodded his head gravely. Then he advanced towards Mrs. Wright, and shook hands silently with her and Lena. He was unusually awkward that morning, and looked very large and out of place in the dainty, womanly room. He stroked his chin with his strong brown hand almost nervously.

‘I *am* glad,’ he said at length ; ‘I *am* glad !’

Then he looked round the room rather helplessly. The chairs were ridiculously

small and frail compared to his huge frame, and he made no attempt to sit down.

‘I have just bought a very good saddle,’ he said suddenly, and without any apparent sequence of thought. ‘The man is altering it for me . . . I suppose I can countermand it now.’

He smiled a little, and the ladies smiled sympathetically. The two elder women took an ardent interest in that saddle, just as they would have taken an interest in Digestive Bread or the death of Alcibiades, if Charlie had brought the subject under their notice.

Then they talked of Vienna and the journey there, praising the gifted Mr. Bradshaw, and abusing the German railways, until Charles Mistley took his temporary leave.

He wandered down Seymour Street in an absent-minded manner. Presently he came upon a little black-and-tan terrier sitting upon a door-step, with its quivering spine

pressed against the immovable door. He stopped before it, and the dog raised one paw as if to beg him to ring the bell, setting back its head, and looking up at him with pretty canine coquetry. Without thinking much of what he was doing, the sailor raised his hand, and rang the bell ; then he strode slowly on.

‘ I *am* glad,’ he murmured to himself ;
‘ yes, I *am* glad !’

After walking for some distance, he drew his watch from his pocket, and carried it for some time in his hand, as if to have it ready to look at as soon as he had finished with the thought then occupying his mind. He looked at the face of it for some moments without seeing the time ; then he suddenly realized what he was doing.

‘ By George !’ he exclaimed ; ‘ by George ! I am in time for the alternative yet.’ And, calling a cab, he drove rapidly to the Admiralty.



CHAPTER XIX.

THE three ladies were again sitting in the drawing-room in Seymour Street together. It was the Monday morning. Colonel Wright had telegraphed several times from Vienna and other towns on the homeward journey. The most important item in these messages had been that, despite medical advice, Winyard Mistley insisted upon coming home at once, and they might be expected at eleven o'clock on the Monday morning.

It was after eleven now. The ladies were working with a calmness which was perhaps slightly overdone. Adonis slept peacefully

beside Mrs. Mistley's chair, upon a corner of her dress.

'These Continental trains are invariably late,' observed Mrs. Wright, glancing at the clock upon the mantelpiece.

'Yes,' was Mrs. Mistley's cheerful reply ; 'we can hardly expect them yet. Colonel Wright did wisely, I think, in suggesting that none of us should go to the station ; there will be noise and fuss enough without my being there to agitate Win, and make him pretend that he is stronger than he really is. It is much better that Charlie should meet them.'

'Where Charlie is,' suggested Mrs. Wright, in a low voice, 'there will be no fuss. He possesses the happy faculty of doing the right thing at the right moment, without appearing to know that he is doing it.'

'Yes,' said Charlie's mother vaguely. She was about to say something more, but checked herself suddenly ; and spreading her work out

before her, she proceeded to smooth it out with deft fingers, patting it here and there, and tugging it cornerwise. While thus occupied, she spoke again, without looking up, in a light conversational tone.

‘Do you know,’ she said, ‘I cannot quite realize that Win is ill. What ailments he has had, have always come when . . . he was away . . . from me. I cannot picture to myself how he will take it; he has always been so well and hearty.’

‘According to papa’s telegram, he is hearty still,’ said Lena gaily, as she carefully selected a thread of silk from a parti-coloured tangle. ‘He telegraphed, “Spirits high,” which sounds like a meteorological report.’

‘I think Win’s spirits are proof against a good deal,’ replied Mrs. Mistley, with a glance towards Lena. It was a mere passing peep, but the little lady saw enough to convince her that the needle stood a very poor chance of being threaded just then.

At this moment the sound of approaching wheels broke upon them all. The vehicle audibly stopped at the door, and Adonis looked up sharply. Lena was still striving to get the silk somewhere near the eye of the needle.

Mrs. Mistley laid aside her work. She tried to do it as calmly and quietly as she could, but there was something dramatic even in her intense self-possession. She drew in a long uneven breath, and rose from her seat, looking towards the door.

Adonis stood at her side with his left ear on duty.

Already there were footsteps downstairs in the hall. Then came a little laugh of one voice only, and Adonis literally shrieked at the sound of it. Like a battering-ram he sprang at the door, endeavouring to seize the handle in his strong teeth. He fell back and threw himself against the wood again. Then Mrs. Mistley opened the door.

On the threshold stood Winyard. The Colonel's arm was round him, and he had one hand on the old traveller's shoulder, for he could not stand alone.

Mrs. Mistley stood on tip-toe with an almost girlish grace, and Winyard's free arm went round her. No one spoke a word.

Then Mrs. Wright came forward and assisted him to a chair. As he sank into it she stooped and kissed him.

'Do not be too kind to me,' he said, smiling. 'I am rather weak, and kindness has been known to kill people, I believe.'

He looked up to shake hands with Lena, and she saw that there were tears in his eyes.

Adonis was standing on his hind-legs, with his fore-paws resting on the arm of the low chair. His faithful eyes were luminous with love, and he whined continuously with his square chin upraised.

At this moment Charlie entered the room.

He was laden with sundry wraps and packages, which he set down absently upon a polished table.

‘The return of the prodigal,’ he said cheerfully. ‘I *do* wish I liked cold veal!’

This brought Mrs. Wright’s thoughts back to practical matters.

‘Beef-tea!’ she exclaimed. ‘You *must* have some beef-tea or some wine!’

Winyard pointed solemnly at the Colonel.

‘Ask him,’ he said; ‘I know nothing about it. The affair has lost all interest for me. He has taken charge of the matter. I am not allowed to say what I like or what I dislike—in fact, I am the bane of my own life!’

‘Beef-tea,’ said Colonel Wright severely, as he drew off his gloves. ‘Yes—beef-tea.’

This was soon brought, and the whole party stood round the sick man to see that he consumed it.

‘ And have you done all you wanted to do, Win ?’ asked Mrs. Mistley presently.

‘ Oh yes !’ he replied breathlessly, between the sips. ‘ Won’t you let me off the rest ? —I am getting down to the sediment now !’

But Colonel Wright was not content with this laconic account of his pupil’s exploits.

‘ He has done that and more !’ he said exultingly. ‘ He has done what no living man has done before him, or could hope to do again. He has been right through to Peshawur and back. He has mapped out every feasible route, noted the position of every well, and obtained every imaginable item of information that the officer commanding a division could require. And that quite outside his own diplomatic work, which has been carried out to the letter !’

Such was the home-coming of Winyard Mistley.

It was only by degrees that they extracted

from him the details of his perilous journey. How he escaped detection by the readiness of his wit. How, encompassed by danger, treachery, and fanaticism on every side, he came through it all by sheer self-reliance and intrepidity. How he lay for months ill in a Turcoman tent, nursed and tended by the simple nomads. How, time after time, the combination seemed too strong for him to fight against, and how his good fortune attended him to the end. But all this had to be guessed at by his loving listeners. The story of that unique and wonderful journey was never fully told. Partly by aid of their own imaginations, partly by persistent questioning, they succeeded in putting together a more or less connected narrative ; but Winyard's own account was decidedly unsatisfactory, as might well have been expected. A man cannot tell his own story advantageously. There was no one else to tell the tale of Winyard Mistley's achieve-

ment, and so it was never told. Far away, on the sands of the Khivan desert, out of the caravan route, in a trackless waste untrodden by the foot of man for years together, a few whitened bones, picked clean and scattered by the quarrelling vultures, lay beneath the gleaming sun, waiting the end of all things. This, and nothing more, was what remained of the young Englishman's daring companion during the greater part of his wonderful journey, and the story of it lay silent with those bones.

But if the record of the work was lost, the fruits were well preserved, and among these the Colonel spent many a busy day. The news of Winyard's return soon spread among the initiated, and the house in Seymour Street was besieged by visitors. The results of the journey were, however, kept strictly secret, only the Colonel and a few experts being allowed to assist the invalid in the work of putting them in order. Soon,

however, the news leaked out, and questions were asked in Parliament, with the result of acquainting Russia with the fact that she had been beaten in her own favourite pastime of Eastern diplomacy. Article after article appeared in the Moscow papers, calling for further investigation into the carelessness of the avowed Russian agents in Afghanistan, who could give no details of the passage of this dangerous traveller through their midst. These writings, hot from the brain of one who, even as these lines are penned, is being mourned by the nation he served so well with pen and press, were issued with the view of learning more of the results of Winyard Mistley's observations; but in this object they failed. All that the world learnt was that the journey had been accomplished, whether alone or with companions, whether hasty and superficial or slow and searching, never transpired.

Day by day Winyard regained his strength,

and the lines upon his face—lines speaking of hardship, hunger, thirst, and anxiety—began to disappear. They never quite left him, however, but remained there, signs of age upon a young face—silent testimonies of forgotten sufferings. His appearance had, at first, been rather a shock to all who remembered him as he was in former days. He was not pale, but the dull brownness of his face seemed only to accentuate the drawn and weary expression of his features; through all, however, and even when he could not stand unsupported, the brave strong look never left his eyes.

It may have been by sheer force of will, but his boyish cheerfulness was as reliable as of old. He laughed at his own weakness and incapacity to walk alone; yet his laughter failed to detract from the pathos of the picture afforded by the Colonel assisting him to move about. He laughed at his own childish helplessness in the matter of cutting up his food,

and audaciously handed his plate to Lena for assistance.

Altogether he was the most unsatisfactory convalescent imaginable, except that he made visible and rapid strides towards health. There was no demand for lowered tones and noiseless movements in his presence. Inquiries after his welfare were treated jocosely, and unless the medicine was administered with severity and regularity, he was only too ready to forget all about it.





CHAPTER XX.

A FEW days after Winyard Mistley's return to London, his brother Charlie went to Devonport. From there he wrote that he had been offered the *White Swallow* gunboat, destined for service in the Pacific Ocean. 'Of course I have accepted,' he wrote ; and gave no particulars as to when the *White Swallow* was likely to sail, and of what duration her absence from England would probably be.

Mrs. Mistley, who was now established at Seymour Street previous to a move northward to Broomhaugh, received the letter at the breakfast-table. She read part of it

aloud, and as she folded it again, gave a little sigh of resignation.

‘Such it is,’ she said, ‘to be the mother of a sailor and a soldier. They play Box and Cox to the end of the chapter. However, I suppose Charlie is to be congratulated. He is young to have command of a gunboat.’

‘With all his assumed laziness,’ observed the Colonel gravely, ‘Charlie will push his way upwards, through the ruck. He is a fine sailor, I am sure.’

That same afternoon Mrs. Mistley and Mrs. Wright went out together, in order, they said, to have a quiet afternoon’s shopping, as there were many things to be purchased and sent on to Broomhaugh. The mother and son had been nearly a week in Seymour Street, and there was now nothing to delay their departure for the north.

The Colonel, being left in charge of the

invalid, proposed a drive in the Park, as the air was lovely and the sun not too warm. But Winyard languidly expressed a fear that he was not quite up to it, innocently ignoring the fact that he had walked downstairs alone that morning. Then he lay back on his sofa and gently closed his eyes, as if composing himself to peaceful slumber.

Presently the Colonel left the room, treading noiselessly so as to avoid waking the sleeper. Shortly afterwards, the street-door closed with a smothered bang.

Lena was seated on a low chair near the window, the regular click of her needle acting as a lullaby to the sufferer. Soon, however, Winyard slowly unclosed one eye, then the other. The click of the needle continued. He turned slightly, and lay there watching her. He could scarcely have wished for a pleasanter picture to look upon than that fair English maiden, sitting with daintily bowed head and busy fingers—‘on

duty,' as it were—quietly fulfilling her woman's mission. Like his brother, he noticed then that Lena was no longer the thoughtless merry girl whom he had known two years before. The same brave cheeriness was there, but it was less liable to the influence of circumstances ; the same healthy power of enjoyment, but it was tempered by a greater thoughtfulness. Something in the curve of her closed lips, something perhaps in a newly acquired droop of the eyelids, reminded him of the bravest woman he had ever known ; of one who, widowed, and the mother of wandering sons, had yet made her life a bright one, and by seeking to make others happy, had acquired the habit of happiness herself. What pen could hope to follow the thoughts passing through a man's brain ? Winyard Mistley lay watching Lena for about five minutes, but five pages of mine could not tell a tithe of what was passing in his mind.

Presently he rose gravely from the sofa, and stood for a moment by the mantelpiece, supporting himself with both hands. His back was turned towards Lena, and on the lean brown face reflected in the mirror—at which, however, he never glanced—there was a strange restless expression.

Contrary to her custom, Lena failed to look up. She did not even ask him if there was anything he might require. Then he slowly turned, and made his laborious way across the room, assisting himself with one piece of furniture after another. Somehow she forgot to offer him her help ; somehow he had no little pleasantry ready to make her smile ; and yet neither seemed to notice the difference. She continued her work (the stitches were unpicked later on, being of very peculiar construction); and Mistley stood close at hand, looking down upon her bent head.

There was a humble chair at her side,

and into this he lowered himself cautiously, after the manner of an old man.

‘Lena,’ he said, turning towards her with a hungry look in his eyes; ‘Lena, do you think that a man can be sure of his own mind, if the same thought has never left it for nearly two years?’

She bowed her head lower over her work, still striving to make the needle perform its right and proper function, but answered him no word.

He leant forward and took the work from her hands, allowing it to fall to the ground. Then he quietly took possession of those busy fingers.

‘Answer me,’ he whispered. ‘Answer me!’

‘Yes . . . I think so,’ she replied at length.

‘Through it all,’ he said eagerly—
‘through danger and through hope, through work, through sleep, through hunger, sickness and success—there has been one thought

in my brain. That thought . . . was . . .
Lena—Lena . . . Lena !

Still bending over her imprisoned hands, she swayed unconsciously towards him. Then, somehow, he found his arms were round her, though he had no recollection of placing them there.

* * * *

Three weeks later, one afternoon as the sun began to throw a golden ray from west to east up the English Channel, a gunboat moved out into Plymouth Sound, and cast her anchor there. The *White Swallow* was ready for sea—‘ready for anything,’ her young commander said. Deeply laden with coal for her long voyage, she was as taut, and trim, and sparkling as paint and polished brass could make her.

Already the strong individuality of the stalwart ruler was beginning to make itself discernible among the members of her company. The *White Swallow* was emi-

nently a 'quiet' ship. There was no shouting, no unnecessary blowing of boatswain's whistles. Everything seemed to fit into its place—every man into his duties. And yet she was not a gloomy ship, for every man looked forward to his six years' absence with serenity.

About an hour before she was due to sail, a boat put off from the Dockyard, and in a few minutes was alongside the gunboat. Seated in the stern of this small craft was Laurance Lowe. He climbed up the white ladder, and made his way aft with slow but assured steps. Charles Mistley came forward to meet him, and they turned towards the quarter-deck together.

'It is very good of you to come,' said the young sailor.

The old man did not appear to consider that this required an answer. He looked round him critically with a practised eye. It was not the first time that he had trodden

the deck of a man-of-war, though his recollections of such dated back to the days of the Crimea. He loosened the old silk comforter that took the place of a top-coat on his spare frame, and said :

‘ You are ready ? ’

‘ Yes, we sail in half an hour.’

The young sailor looked across the smooth water to where the land rose gently, green and tree-clad, towards the blue heights of Dartmoor. There was no shadow of fear in his clear eyes, no sign of flinching from the dreary years he knew he was facing. And thus they stood side by side, the old man whose voyage across the troubled sea was nearly over (he had made bad weather of it, beating up against a head wind all the way), and the young sailor—tall, stalwart, and almost painfully self-contained—who, like his companion, had met the stress at the very beginning of his journey.

They talked a little in their usual scrappy,

unsatisfactory manner, and then Laurance Lowe beckoned to his boatman to haul up to the ladder.

He turned, and looked round the vessel once more ; then he raised his solemn eyes to his companion's face. They were unusually wide open, and Charlie noted the pale blueness of the iris as he returned their gaze.

‘I suppose,’ said the old man slowly, ‘I suppose’—and with a wave of his lean hand he designated the vessel—‘that you have got the object of your ambition now.’

He finished his sentence with the shadow of a smile, which could only be seen in his eyes, for it did not move the white moustache or narrow beard.

Charlie did not reply at once. He turned to take some letters from the hand of a quarter-master, and waited till the man had left the quarter-deck before answering his companion's vague question.

‘I think,’ he said at last, ‘that a man has

two objects in his life. At least it is . . . it was . . . so with me.'

Laurance Lowe waited silently for him to continue.

Charlie looked round his vessel almost critically.

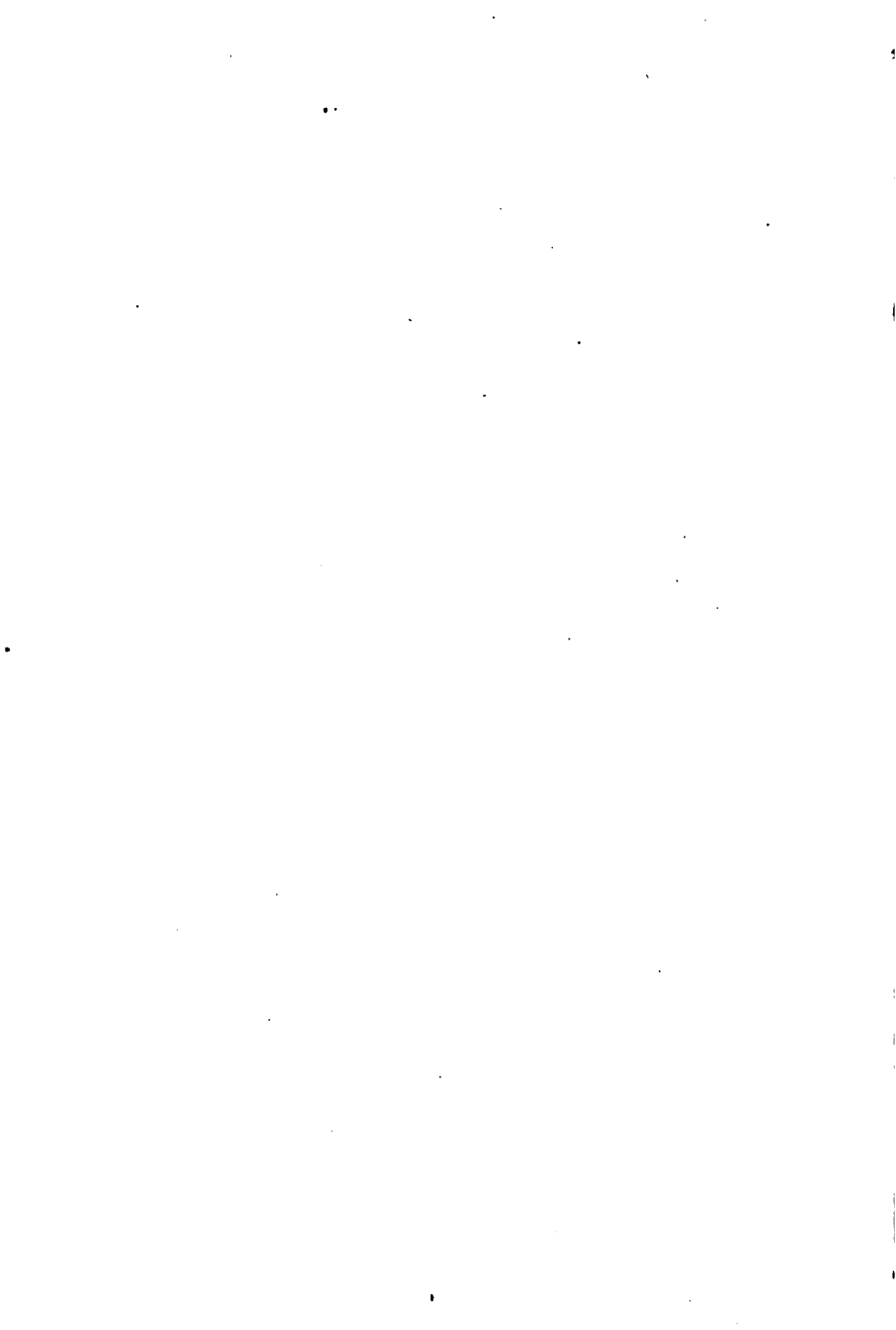
'This is one,' he said.

'Yes,' murmured Lowe, standing in front of him, and looking up into his motionless face with lifeless eyes.

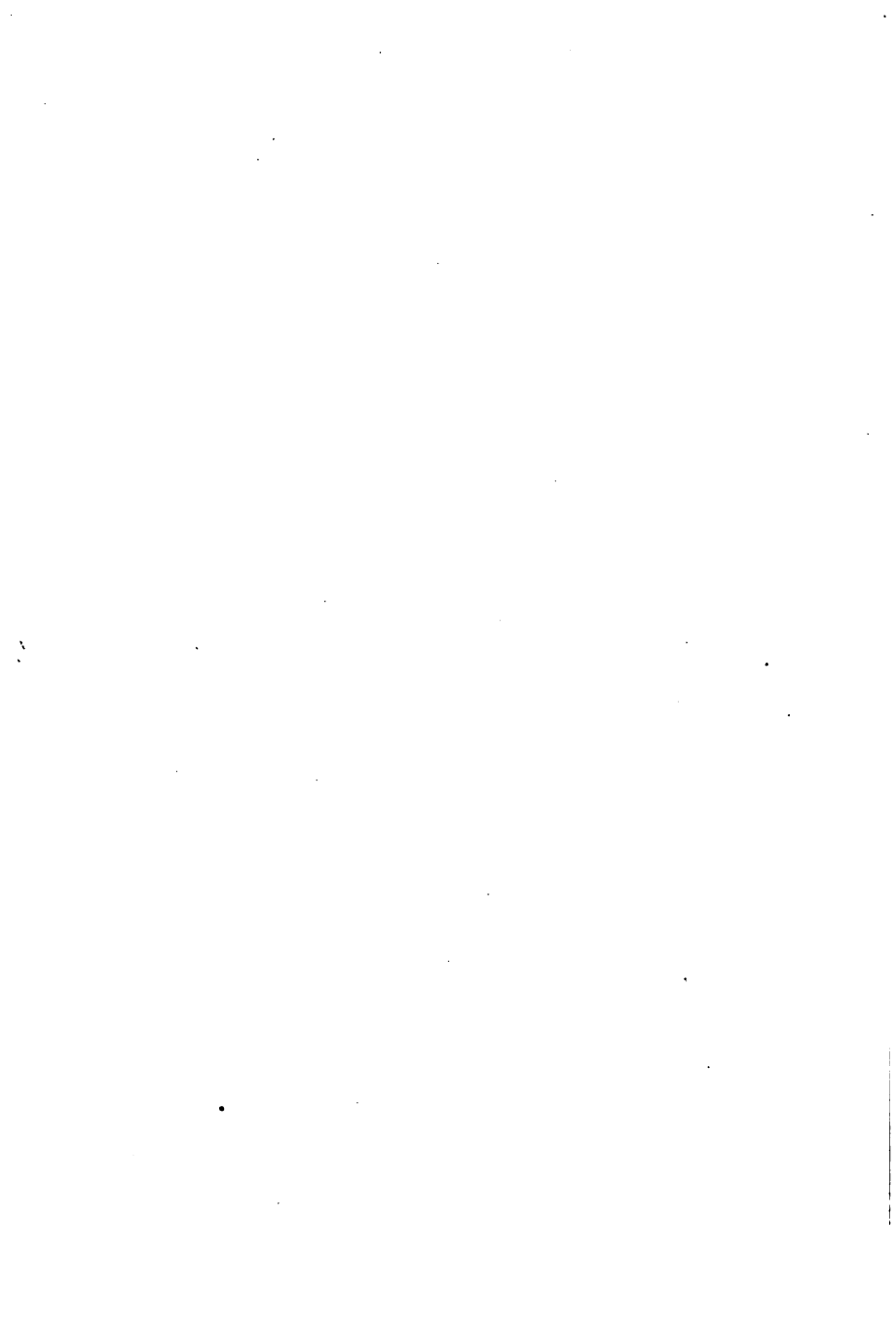
'And the other . . . ' continued the sailor, slowly meeting his gaze. 'And the other . . . I think you know what the other . . . was.'

'Yes,' said Lowe softly, as he held out his hand to say farewell. 'Yes . . . I know. With me . . . it was her mother.'

THE END.







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